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**“The Spirit of Revolution:”  
The Impact of Rum on the Formation of the United States**

**SUBMITTED TO**

**Professor Jonathan Petropoulos  
and  
Professor Lisa Cody**

**By  
Charles Streater**

**For Honors Senior Thesis in History  
Fall 2020-Spring 2021  
Submitted May 3, 2021**

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*“I know not why We Should blush to confess that Molasses was an essential Ingredient in American independence. Many great Events have proceeded from much Smaller Causes”*

-President John Adams, Letter to William Tudor Sr., 11 August 1818

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### Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of rum, be it the distillation, consumption, or trade of it, upon the formation of the American Revolution and the desire of American Colonists for independence. Through the analysis of three distinct subfactors: rum as an economic force, rum as a political tool, and the cultural and societal impacts of the rum trade and its subsequent removal from the American ethos, this project contends that rum as a commodity became a driving factor in the creation of the United States. While much has been written on the roles of stamps, sugar, and tea in the American Revolution, there is a gap in such literature regarding rum and its subsequent dismissal that, given the outsized impact of the spirit, feels both glaring and purposeful. Rum was and remains the first American spirit—albeit forgotten. Rum now is a symbol of tropical lands and far-away beaches, not colonial dissidence or patriotic rebellion, but this was not always the case. Examining how rum formed America and why Americans forgot it reveals not only lessons in the ethos of the United States but also macro-economic trends regarding a shift towards capitalistic endeavors that played a far larger role in fermenting rebellion than any desire for liberty. The fallout of such fiscally focused foundations still resonates with American culture today, and as such, the exploration of rum's role in eighteenth-century America can shed light on the perhaps misguided alignment of American values and the purposeful decisions that created them.

### Introduction: *A Strange New World*

When Christopher Columbus sailed for the Americas in 1492, he began an era of European colonial expansion into the New World that would last over three hundred years and bring with it tens of thousands of new settlers seeking to make their fortunes in the distant lands. Initially, Columbus was primarily concerned with discovering new trading routes and avenues for precious metals production; by his second trip in 1493, things had changed as Spain sought to establish a more permanent foothold in the West. As a result, he brought with him a host of new products to attempt to harvest for profit, chief among them a new crop which had swept Europe by storm the previous three centuries and on whose back the New World and the eventual New England rum trade would grow: sugar.

By Columbus' time sugar was already an object of much fascination and value to Europeans and had been for quite some while. First domesticated in New Guinea around 8000 B.C. and first introduced to Mediterranean and European palates by the conquests of Alexander the Great, sugar had a long-standing as a miraculous substance to the elites of Europe.<sup>1</sup> Be it is as a highly valued spice in cooking, a sweetener in foods, or even an ornamental decoration for festivities to display one's wealth, sugar had been sought after and desired the world over for millennia.<sup>2</sup> The only problem was sugar was troublesome to grow, expensive to do so, and even more expensive to purchase. Attempts to cultivate sugar within the Mediterranean Basin and Europe had been numerous by the close of the fifteenth century but were as of yet largely unsuccessful given the high rainfall, soaring

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 66.

temperatures, and extensive labor needed to cultivate the crop.<sup>3</sup> The most fruitful of these attempts came from the Atlantic islands of Spain and Portugal, including Madeira, the Canaries, and São Tomé. However, these were unable to keep up with soaring demand and, as such, means of cultivation elsewhere were sought. Hence sugar's transplantation to the New World under Columbus began, and the race to profit off what Alexander the Great's generals had called the "strange reed from which honey flows without the help of bees" was off.<sup>4</sup>

While sugar was first grown in the New World in Spanish Santo Domingo and first shipped back to Europe from there beginning around 1516, it was not the overnight economic sensation one might expect. It would be over a century before sugar cultivation in the New World began to expand rapidly, and even this was only after the British colonization of Barbados in 1627 and the sudden influx of slave labor meant a new challenger in the field was present.<sup>5</sup> Although the first to grow sugar, Spain had largely abandoned the project over the course of the century, favoring instead to focus on the extraction of precious metals in Meso and South America.<sup>6</sup> Rather than using its Caribbean holdings for profitable production, the Spanish Crown saw the islands more as waystations and safe havens for their fleets laden with silver to stop off during the arduous journey back to Europe.<sup>7</sup> It was not until the Northern European powers of

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<sup>3</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Rodriguez, "Nearchus: Macedonian General and Satrap," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nearchus>.

<sup>5</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

England and France began to join the fray around 1650 on the islands of Barbados and Martinique that cultivation and production, at last, began in earnest.<sup>8</sup>

For these familiar European rivals, mining was of little consequence, and instead, their New World acquisitions focused more upon trade and the production of marketable commodities that could be bought and sold at home and abroad in a mercantilist system.<sup>9</sup> As such, the French and the British highly valued plantation products, and the production of cash crops like tobacco and sugar began to flourish in lands under their rule. The British were the most ambitious in their efforts to grow sugar: they fought the most to acquire new islands for cultivation (notably conquering Jamaica from Spain in 1655 and soon after adding more islands to their domain), they planted the most reeds to harvest, imported the most slaves, and went the furthest in creating a plantation system of which sugar was the essential product.<sup>10</sup> By the turn of the seventeenth century, Britain had created an effective monopoly on sugar production and forced any rivals, chiefly Portuguese-controlled Brazilian sugar, from the domestic and Northern European markets.<sup>11</sup> What had begun as a modest consumption of 1,000 hogsheads of sugar and an exportation of 2,000 in Britain in 1660 ballooned to a gargantuan 100,000 hogsheads imported and 18,000 exported by 1730.<sup>12</sup> For the first time in history, sugar was everywhere, and it was here to stay. As the means of production in the British Caribbean had increased, so too did the desire and appetite for sugar consumption, not just in Britain

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<sup>8</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Russell R. Menard, "Plantation Empire: How Sugar and Tobacco Planters Built Their Industries and Raised an Empire," *Agricultural History* 81, no. 3 (2007): pp. 309-332, 311.

<sup>12</sup> Menard, "Plantation Empire," 312.

but all around Europe. Further adding to the craze was that the retail price of sugar halved between 1630 and 1680 thanks to increased production and made the once luxury good more accessible than ever.<sup>13</sup> As historian Ralph Davis aptly put it, “Sugar which began the century as a monopoly of a privileged minority,” soon became a household staple in British homes everywhere; he added, “by 1750 the poorest English farm labourer’s wife took sugar in her tea.”<sup>14</sup> By 1774 sugar and sugar-related products accounted for a fifth of England’s total imports. Sugar and its distribution had become arguably the world’s most profitable and important commodities market.<sup>15</sup>

As is natural when faced with such a strong, inelastic demand for a product, other entities sought to enter and disrupt the market. While England and its planters had enjoyed a relative monopoly and monopolistic prices from 1660 onwards, their success earned the envy of Portuguese and especially French planters who redoubled their efforts in the early eighteenth century to recapture the Northern European market. The subsequent competition drove the price of foreign exported sugar down and, when coupled with the noted reduction of price on the domestic side, severely ate into the profits of British colonialists who had taken sizeable financial risks to grow their enterprises.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned previously, the cultivation of sugar is no easy or inexpensive task. It requires scores of workers laboring day and night under the harshest conditions to yield a final product worthy of sale. While labor had initially been a mix of indentured and slave labor, by the late seventeenth century the slave trade was in full effect as men

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<sup>13</sup> Ralph Davis, “English Foreign Trade, 1660-1700,” *The Economic History Review* 7, no. 2 (1954): pp. 150-166, 152-153.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Davis, *The Rise of Atlantic Economies*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 251.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, *The Rise of Atlantic Economies*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 67.

and women stolen from their homes were forced to work under the worst of conditions. As for cultivation, planters used every inch of arable land on the Caribbean islands to maximize product growth, meaning all foodstuffs and material needs would have to be imported from either Britain or its colonies in New England at a significant cost.<sup>17</sup> The mere act of harvesting cane required dozens of teams of slaves chopping it under a grueling sun into manageable halves and then immediately rolling the stalks in large man-powered mills to remove the liquid contents from which the sugar may be extracted and crystallized.<sup>18</sup> The speed at which slaves could extract the liquid post-harvest was paramount for fear of pests, rapid degradation, or spoilage that sugarcane is prone to, and so even more slaves were required to expedite the process.<sup>19</sup> The sugar liquid was then heated in large industrial furnaces causing evaporation, and subsequently, a sucrose concentration from which sugar crystals formed that were then harvested, dried, and prepared for shipment.<sup>20</sup> However, while cooling and crystallizing, approximately half of the harvested sugar forms “low-grade massecuites that leave molasses that cannot be crystallized further and was originally seen as industrial waste.”<sup>21</sup>

For most of the first two centuries of cane harvesting in the West Indies, there was very little innovation to improve production or decrease the reliance on manual labor. As such, slavery was a vital part of the economic equation to make sugar profitable and lower the continued costs that a free and paid worker may otherwise incur. Between 1701 and 1810, Barbados imported more than 252,000 African slaves despite being an island

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<sup>17</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 67.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

just 166 square miles in area, while Jamaica in the same timeframe imported over 662,400 slaves.<sup>22</sup> The planter's primary problem with this, abhorrent use of slavery aside, was that buying, importing, and owning a slave, let alone hundreds of them, was still incredibly expensive, and plantations often took years to earn back the capital required to become operational. Given the tremendous upfront costs of starting a plantation and the continued costs to operate one, many were founded on early forms of credit.<sup>23</sup> A plantation owner, usually an absentee businessman, would approach metropolitan banks in England asking for a loan and in return promised repayment with interest from their future proceeds in a rudimentary form of credit-based capitalism.<sup>24</sup> This creditor based arrangement worked splendidly for both parties if a plantation was successful and sugar prices remained high in the seventeenth century. However, as prices fell by the onset of the eighteenth century and operational costs remained astronomical, many debtors struggled to pay back their loans. Dozens of existing and newfound plantations would be beset by bankruptcy as the century drew to a close, and an economic reckoning for both parties ensued in which plantation owners needed to develop new means to profit from sugar if no changes in price or production could be achieved.<sup>25</sup> For this, plantation owners everywhere turned to the at first oft-forgotten and little cared for by-product of sugar production, molasses, as a newfound and vital stream of revenue.

Molasses, as one may recall, is an industrial waste from which no further sugar may be derived. How is it then that plantation owners would be able to increase revenue

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<sup>22</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, *The Rise of Atlantic Economies*, 239.

and make up for falling sugar prices via a product they could not even crate sugar from? The answer to that is, of course, rum. Early on in the production of sugar in the West Indies, a few intrepid plantation owners realized that a hearty spirit could be created when molasses was allowed to ferment and then be distilled, and as it would turn out, there was quite a market for this fiery drink originally known as *kill-devil*.<sup>26</sup> Plantation owners came to realize that by beginning to export rum and molasses, they could largely cover the entire costs of their operations, and thus all sugar sales would result in pure profit. A fact which was touched upon by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* when he wrote, “a sugar planter expects that the rum and the molasses would defray the whole expense of cultivation.”<sup>27</sup> Whatsmore, the plantation owners’ colonial brethren in New England had also developed a penchant not only for the consumption of rum but for its production as well. From this mutual affinity, a trade link developed in which finished rum and, more commonly, molasses was sent North in exchange for currency, foodstuffs, and materials that the islands were incapable of providing themselves. Meanwhile, the molasses in New England was then distilled on an industrial scale into rum of its own for consumption or sale in the first colonial breakage from a mercantilist economy. In trading molasses to alleviate financial pressure, plantation owners had inadvertently created the first steps of an entirely New World market independent of European oversight or

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<sup>26</sup> Rum was originally known as such primarily to New England Colonists, who upon trying the spirit for the first time, often found it “a hot, hellish, and terrible liquor” strong enough to kill the devil. For more information see, Anatoly Liberman, “The Rum History of the Word ‘Rum,’” Oxford University Press Blog, October 6, 2010, <https://blog.oup.com/2010/10/rum/>.

<sup>27</sup> Lara Cockx, Giulia Meloni, and Johan Swinnen, “Research Gate,” Research Gate (Department of Economics, Nazarbayev University 2 LICOS Centre for Institutions and Economic Performance & Department of Economics, University of Leuven (KU Leuven), November 2, 2019), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337059592\\_The\\_Water\\_of\\_Life\\_and\\_Death\\_A\\_Brief\\_Economic\\_History\\_of\\_Spirits](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337059592_The_Water_of_Life_and_Death_A_Brief_Economic_History_of_Spirits), 63.

mercantilist principles. It is from this market and a desire to maintain the economic advantages it brought that a subsequent desire for liberty would develop in the northern colonies and put them on a collision course with Great Britain.

While the historiography of trade, markets, and exchanges shaping the modern world is extensive, notably Fernand Braudel in his series *The Wheels of Commerce*, there is a lack of modern historiography reflecting the exchange of rum being an economic *and* social force on the United States and the revolution that began it. Given that an essential tenet of Braudel was focusing upon the multi-generational impact of broader social and economic movements to define history and an exploration of rum accomplishes much of the same, such a lapse is ill-warranted. Moreover, as Braudel posited in observing that the “constant interaction of the superstructures and infrastructures of economic life,” one can decipher if “what goes on at the top [has] repercussions at a lower level” and rum provides such a superstructure, the lack of historiography only becomes more glaring.<sup>28</sup> Rum was the broader economic and social web that wove colonists of all classes together and whose disruption would force a societal rebellion that still shapes America. The seeds of the American republic were sown in the sugar fields of the eighteenth-century Caribbean and nurtured to fruition by a deluge of rum, yet there is little knowledge of what this means, why this occurred, or even how? Such questions need answering, and that is what this thesis aims to do. Although the field and timeline studied here is much shorter than those inhabited by Braudel and other scholars, an analysis of the rum-fueled political movement that started America will showcase traits that still exist and define

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<sup>28</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Century: Vol.II: The Wheels of Commerce* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 136.

America today. To understand how the American Revolution began and the role rum played in it, however, it is first essential to know how the American colonies came to be and why they so dearly loved their rum. For that, one must go back in time to the founding of the colonies in New England and examine the role all alcohol, but especially rum, played not only as a libation but also as the lifeblood and currency of a strange new world on the wrong side of the Atlantic. Where better to begin then, than in the early colonies of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, from whom the Revolution would spring, and the rum always flowed.

## Chapter One

### ***Purse Strings and Power: Rum's Role as a Commodity in Early Colonial America***

*“There's but one good reason I can think  
Why People ever cease to drink  
Sobriety the cause is Not,  
Nor fear of being deemed a Sot,  
But if liquor can't be got.”*

-Benjamin Franklin in the *Philadelphia Gazette* 1736

When the first English settlers reached the shores of New England in 1620 and set about establishing a colony there, they brought with them two insatiable appetites. One, for the creation and expansion of a model society centered around a devout adherence to a strict Puritan faith. The second, for beer. In more recent times, the idea of spirits and Puritan faith may seem contradictory; however, for early American colonials, the two went hand in hand as a way of life. Drinking, like praying, was seen as a daily necessity to both bolster one's spirit and ward off potential illnesses.<sup>29</sup> As a renowned French botanist and chemist named Louis L  mary noted in 1704, "liquors that are fermented, revive the Blood and Spirits, and produce feveral other Benefits."<sup>30</sup> Colonists viewed spirits as a gift from God, a sign of his love for humanity that man was meant to consume readily and often, just never to excess. As one minister put it, "Drink is in itself a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness."<sup>31</sup> Luckily, the earliest American settlers had understood their daily needs and packed amply for the journey across the Atlantic. A glance at the cargo logs for the *Mayflower* indicates that "The common proportion of victuals for the sea to a mess [being four men]" included no less than "Four gallons of bear [beer]," additional "Bear as before," and "Hefty conserves of Burnt-Wine and English Spirits."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, "strong waters," primarily Holland Gin and Brandy

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<sup>29</sup> David E. Shi, *The Simple Life Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2007), 28-37.

<sup>30</sup> L  mery Louis et al., *A Treatise of All Sorts of Foods, Both Animal and Vegetable: Also of Drinkables: Giving an Account How to Chuse the Best Sort of All Kinds: of the Good and Bad Effects They Produce: the Principles They Abound with: the Time, Age and Constitution They Are Adapted to ...* 1704 (London, England: Printed for T. Osborne ..., 1745), 322.  
[http://www.globalcommodities.amdigital.co.uk.ccl.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/BL\\_1484\\_c\\_38](http://www.globalcommodities.amdigital.co.uk.ccl.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/BL_1484_c_38).

<sup>31</sup> Increase Mather, *Wo to Drunkards: Two Sermons Testifying against the Sin of Drunkenness, Wherein the Wofulness of That Evil, and the Misery of All That Are Addicted to It, Is Discovered from the Word of God* (Cambridge, Mass: Printed by Marmaduke Johnson and sold by Edmund Ranger, 1983), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Azel Ames, *The May-Flower and Her Log, July 15, 1620-May 6, 1621, Chiefly from Original Sources* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, The Riverside Press, 1901), 142.

known as “aqua vitae,” were considered a necessity to maintain warmth aboard the frigid ship where fires were not an option.<sup>33</sup> It is recorded in more than one account that the darkest day in the already grueling journey was when the would-be colonists depleted their beer stores on December 19<sup>th</sup>, and would have to make do with only water. A true tragedy as it meant any further search for a more suitable landing spot was now impossible, and the colony would have to begin at the next sight of land, which as it happened was Plymouth Rock on December 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>34</sup> As the leader of the expedition, William Bradford wrote,

That night we returned again a-shipboard, with resolution the next morning to settle on some of these places; so in the morning, after we had called on God for direction, we came to this resolution: to go presently ashore again, and to take a better view of two places, which we thought most fitting for us, for we could not now take the time for further search or consideration, our victuals being much spent, especially our beer.<sup>35</sup>

While the *Mayflower*'s log records itself as having brought more than 42 tons of beer, most of this was apparently reserved for the ship's crew, separate from the colonists.<sup>36</sup> As such, upon landing, the settlers found themselves in dire supply of their most favored and required spirits with no easy ways of obtaining more. After all, one could not exactly take a stroll to the local convenience store for a six-pack in early colonial America. Thus, the quest to begin distilling spirits in America began posthaste, first in Massachusetts but soon enough all throughout the colonies as a desire for inebriation and, more importantly, financial success, set in.

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<sup>33</sup> Azel, *The May-Flower and Her Log*, 141.

<sup>34</sup> Azel, *The May-Flower and Her Log*, 198.

<sup>35</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plimouth Plantation (1650)* (New York, NY: Zweihander Press, 2019), 52-53.

<sup>36</sup> Azel, *The May-Flower and Her Log*, 149.

Everywhere that early colonials went, primitive breweries and distilleries began to appear in their wake. All across New England and the Eastern Seaboard, as the colonies expanded, so too did their productive capabilities for spirits.<sup>37</sup> However, early breweries were not the commercial operations nor the vast industrial beacons that one pictures when thinking of a brewery today. Instead, brewing and distillation were primarily at home affairs where individual families produced for their own consumption, and there was little in the way of trade or mass production.<sup>38</sup> Further complicating the issue for early settlers was that grain was often in short supply and devoting large quantities of it towards fermentation was hardly a wise use of resources. However, colonists were apprehensive towards things like the consumption of water as it was often easily contaminated in a way low percentage alcoholic spirits were not. To drink water for early English colonists was to stoop to a level that veered beneath humanity and instead towards beasts. As one sixteenth-century dietitian Andrew Boorde had written, “water is not wholesome solely by itself for an Englishman....”<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately for the early settlers, the lack of grain was not something they could readily overcome, and as such, more and more water had to be consumed, to great ill-effect on the English health and psyche. As one Spanish observer of the early British colonies in Virginia wrote in 1613, “There are about three hundred men there, more or less; and the majority sick and badly treated, because they have nothing but bread of maize, with fish; nor do they drink

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<sup>38</sup> Andrew Barr, *Drink: A Social History of America* (New York, NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 2003), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Barr, *Drink: A Social History of America*, 2-3.

anything but water—all of which is contrary to the nature of the English.”<sup>40</sup> The situation of drinking only water could not continue if the colonies wanted to survive, at least in mental spirit, and soon enough, a new drink would have to rise to take the place normally reserved for English beer.<sup>41</sup>

The first spirit that would seek to do so would be hard cider. A carryover from Britain, Colonial cider was made primarily from crab apples or hastily planted apples from Europe, particularly in the regions north of Virginia where they could grow in abundance.<sup>42</sup> Cider served the dual purpose of being arguably the easiest way of fermenting spirits—no distillation still was needed—as well as the cheapest. All it took for an early colonist to create cider was to harvest a few bushels of apples from a tree, place them into a large barrel, and then wait a sufficient amount of time for fermentation to occur.<sup>43</sup> It required no special tools, no special skills, and could be made in abundance fairly quickly. Nevertheless, cider did have a few significant drawbacks, which meant that it was no longer the drink of choice by the turn of the seventeenth century. First and foremost, home fermented cider is a tricky spirit to get exactly right. As a Swedish traveler noted in his memoirs dating from 1638-1655, a home brewer was often left with a vinegary slush if fermentation was allowed to continue too long.<sup>44</sup> While such a slush was alcoholic in its contents, it certainly left a lot to be desired in the way of taste and was of little use. Furthermore, some colonists came to fear that the consumption of cider

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<sup>40</sup> Barr, *Drink: A Social History of America*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Wayne Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum: a History of the New World in Ten Cocktails* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2006), 67.

<sup>43</sup> Israel Acrelius, *A History of New Sweden, or, The Settlements on the River Delaware (1874)* (Costa Mesa, CA: Knowledge Resources, 2018), 160.

<sup>44</sup> Acrelius, *A History of New Sweden*, 161.

may actually be worse for the body than even water as “it produces rust and verdigris, and frightens some from its use, by fear that it may have the same effect in the body.”<sup>45</sup> These fears meant that cider could never adequately replace the beer or hard spirits desired in colonial diets and so the search continued for a replacement. Luckily, by around the 1670s, a steadier supply of trade had been established with Britain and the Caribbean islands, and a steady supply of molasses and at long last rum had begun to flow freely into the colonies. Rum, therefore, was able to step in and begin to fill the alcoholic void left by beer as the new preferred drink of choice throughout the colonies. Appetite for the fiery new spirit soared as the cost of imported Barbados rum fell by a third between 1673 and 1687 to roughly \$4 per 750ml by today’s measure. Colonists flocked to the new spirit for a multitude of reasons. First, rum was cheap and high in proof, a factor which for colonial appetites can never be overstated. Second, compared with the vinegar swill of the days of cider, the flavor of fine Jamaican rum represented what could certainly be described as an upgrade. Third, rum was an incredibly efficient way of delivering a considerable number of calories into a calorie deficient early colonial diet. Modern rum, at 147 calories per ounce, is the most calorie-dense of all spirits.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the price of a single hundredweight of flour in 1770 was equivalent to eight such measurements of North American rum in trade value, meaning rum was both a calorie and effective way of maintaining colonial dietary needs.<sup>47</sup> While modern nutritionists would understandably scoff at the idea of alcohol as a vital food source, for

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<sup>45</sup> Acrelius, *A History of New Sweden*, 161.

<sup>46</sup> John J. McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution: The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies* (New York, NY: Garland, 1989), 478.

<sup>47</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 478.

the colonists this was precisely the case. Finally, as historian Wayne Curtis writes, “by drinking [rum], colonists effectively announced a change in their role on the global stage...They could now pay for valued goods with the sweat of their labor. Rum not only appealed to the colonists’ love of speedy inebriation, but also brought a measure of status and suggested the first steps toward cultural independence.”<sup>48</sup> This all meant that before long, rum could be found behind every cupboard and bar from Jamestown to Boston and its place as the spirit of America was rapidly beginning.<sup>49</sup>

As rum’s consumption increased in the Americas, so too did its economic importance. Currency shortages were a common phenomenon in the early colonies as what little coinage the colonists had brought with them was soon returned to Europe by trade, and Britain had forbidden the colonies from minting currency of their own.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Britain rarely supplied the colonies with fresh coinage to replace those lost or sent back, and as such, a system of bartering and trading goods for services was commonplace.<sup>51</sup> Such a system inherently lent itself to the trading of alcohol as a commodity given that it did not spoil in the way foodstuffs or other goods may. Additionally, alcohol was the rare commodity that was readily sought by all thanks to the eager as ever drinking habits of the colonists and their continued disdain for all things water. As more and more rum began to enter into the fray in the 1670s, rum became a form of currency for the settlers. Highly treasured for its quality and potency compared to the tepid products available on hand, Caribbean rum became the dominant force for trade

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<sup>48</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 83.

<sup>49</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> “Money in Colonial Times,” Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.philadelphiafed.org/education/money-in-colonial-times>.

<sup>51</sup> “Money in Colonial Times.” Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.

and a veritable gold standard from which much of the rest of the economy flowed. However, importing rum was expensive, and one could not always be assured of its quality, especially if it arrived by way of illegal trade as much Caribbean rum did. Poor quality rum was a problem for merchants as it would cause the reputation of their establishments to tank, and all rum going forward would sit on the shelves collecting dust instead of profit. As one eighteenth-century merchant George Moore grouched, he had been sold 5,000 gallons of Barbados rum “deficient in every of the known qualities...” that was “very bad, not merchantable” and represented a considerable financial loss.<sup>52</sup> Given the costs and uncertainty of foreign rum, coupled with the growing appetite for the product, a market soon developed for native distillation, and the first rum distilleries in America soon began to appear by the close of the seventeenth century. By this time, rum was growing ever more popular, and with that popularity came ever greater monetary and, in turn, societal value.

When one died in early 1700s New England, the value of the rum in the stores of the deceased was to be accounted for and used to pay off debts. When Paul Revere’s widowed mother paid her rent, she did so with “a mix of cash, rum, and a silver thimble.”<sup>53</sup> When one wished to pay a worker for their labor, what better way than with a dram of rum. While states like Massachusetts had attempted to ban the use of rum as a form of payment for labor in 1645, it would routinely remain as workers would not come unless alcohol was part of their compensation.<sup>54</sup> Rum as payment in Massachusetts

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<sup>52</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Martello, *Midnight Ride, Industrial Dawn: Paul Revere and the Growth of American Enterprise* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>54</sup> William Babcock Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620 -1789 Volume 1* (Boston, MA: Houghton & Mifflin, 1890), 275.

openly continued until 1672 when the Massachusetts General Court forbade laborers to demand liquor as part of their compensation.<sup>55</sup> However, even then it routinely occurred, albeit with a bit more discretion and strictly off the books. When a shipbuilder, James West, came to Philadelphia in 1684, he soon after bought himself a shipyard and with it the adjacent tavern known as the Pennypot from which he sold drams of beer and rum.<sup>56</sup> As his records show, West, like many colonial entrepreneurs, used this tavern to pay his workforce by way of drink. What debts his contractors incurred while drinking at the tavern after a hard day's work, he wrote off on their wages the next day.<sup>57</sup> In doing so, West saved himself a large portion of hard cash that he would otherwise spend on salary and ensured himself a happy, if somewhat inebriated, workforce.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, West's accounts reveal the system of rum-based bartering that became more prevalent within the colonies year by year. When one man, Dennis Rathford, needed repairs on his ship, what finer way than to pay West with stores of rum, cider, and molasses which were gladly accepted.<sup>59</sup> West could use these stores for personal consumption, or better yet, for "laundering through his tavern," serving the rum in place of his own and further decreasing the costs related to his workforce.<sup>60</sup> Even the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, was not immune from doling out rum to workers on his Pennsbury

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<sup>55</sup> Weeden, *Economic and Social History of New England*, 275.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>57</sup> Unpublished Account Book of James West and Gregory Marlow ~ 1685, (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, 1661-1931, American Business Records), 10, as cited in Russel F. Weigley, *Philadelphia: a 300-Year History* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 754.

<sup>58</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> West and Marlow, Account Book, HSP.

<sup>60</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 29.

mansion in lieu of solely monetary payment.<sup>61</sup> When faced with a shortage of rum, Penn fired off a series of urgent letters to an associate, James Logan, demanding more rum rather than attempt to exhort his workers to “labor without liquor,” continuing, “We want rum here, having not a quarter of a pint in the house among so many workmen.”<sup>62</sup>

As a result of its immense popularity in the Americas, rum shifted from a relatively New World entity to one readily embraced by the European world at the end of the seventeenth century. Thanks to the growing Triangle Trade, where rum constituted one of the only finished, un-spoilable, and desirable (thanks to its taste) products available for sale from the Americas, rum had steadily seeped into the taverns and homes of the European populace. An early attempt at chronicling the growing British Empire by John Oldmixon in 1708 quotes a letter to the Crown from the British Governor of Jamaica at the time, Sir Dalby Thomas, on the growing value of the molasses and rum trade between the colonies to the British Empire. Thomas writes, “We must consider too the Spirits arising from the *melasses*, which is sent from the Sugar Colonies to the other Colonies and to England; which if all were sold in England, and turn’d into Spirits, it would amount annually to above to above £500,000 at half the Price like Quantity of Brandy from France would cost.”<sup>63</sup> Dalby’s letter shows that he recognized not only what Sydney Mintz described as the “different sources of mercantile profit to be had from the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from William Penn to James Logan, Pennsbury, 14th October 1700, in *Correspondence between William Penn and James Logan, Secretary of the Province of Pennsylvania, and Others, 1700-1750. From the Original Letters in Possession of the Logan Family.*, ed. Deborah Logan and Edward Armstrong (Philadelphia, PA: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1870), pp. 15-16, 16.

<sup>63</sup> John Oldmixon and Herman Moll, *The British Empire in America Containing the History of the Discovery, Settlement, Progress and Present State of All the British Colonies on the Continent and Islands of America. With Curious Maps Done from the Newest Surveys*, version V. 1 (London: J. Nicholson, B. Tooke, 1708), 17.

sugar colonies,” but also “the vast and incompletely fulfilled [financial] promise of these colonies” that could be met with increased rum production.<sup>64</sup> As a final example of rum’s expanded global popularity, when Adam Smith later wrote his *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, he noted that the British homeland had taken towards the American habit of paying for labor by way of rum when he recounts that ship carpenters earned “ten shillings and sixpence currency, with a pint of rum worth sixpence sterling.”<sup>65</sup> All told, rum was everywhere by the mid-1770s and the financial gains to be had from producing and trading it were only growing.

The role of the Triangle Trade in creating a Trans-Atlantic taste for rum was significant and while there is a preponderance of historiography on the Trade, there is a surprising amount of inaccuracy and outright falsehood to such histories. Most readers are likely aware of the concept of rum traded for slaves, slaves for molasses, and molasses for rum that many of these histories describe as commonplace, however, this was simply not the case. Indeed, by any measure a historian can apply beyond a human one, the involvement of the colonial rum industry in the slave trade was insignificant.<sup>66</sup> For one, it was far more common for ships to undergo the Middle Passage of the trade directly from the West Indies as a means of saving time and money on the voyage. Second, although there can be no diminishing the 84,580 human beings taken as part of the American slave trade between 1626-1775, this number by a strictly quantitative measure pales to the 528,693, 832,047, and 325,918 souls taken by the Portuguese,

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<sup>64</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, edited by J. Shield Nicholson, (Middletown, DE: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 113.

<sup>66</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 492.

British, and French merchants of the era—none of whom traded in colonial rum.<sup>67</sup> Third, of the rum produced and imported into the American colonies, only 3.7% was shipped to Africa in 1770.<sup>68</sup> While there is no denying that the American colonies *did* play a role in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, nor that rum hubs such as Newport and Boston were some of the largest centers for slave trafficking into the colonies, the direct link between rum and the slave trade is not as it is often written to be. Such inaccuracy in historiography is likely a result of broader associations between rum and slavery that will be discussed later in this paper, but this does not excuse the continued misrepresentation of the Triangle Trade they propagate.

Misrepresented links to the slave trade aside, rum was still a critical component of daily life and trade in the American colonies by the early eighteenth century and had come to dominate all aspects of colonial life. No drink was more consumed, more served, or more desired than rum. Along with this importance was a tremendous financial incentive to produce and sell rum in greater and greater quantities as the century progressed. A glance at the ledgers of a female tavern-keeper from Boston in 1765 showcases that rum or rum-based drinks accounted for nearly 80% of all hard alcohol sales for the establishment. Moreover, these sales accounted for more than 60% of all sales within the tavern.<sup>69</sup> The only other hard spirits with sales of note were gin and whiskey; however, these suffered from the additional cost of needing importation hence

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<sup>67</sup> “Trans-Atlantic Slave Voyage Estimates 1626-1775,” *Slave Voyages*, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>.

<sup>68</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 495.

<sup>69</sup> “An Innkeeper’s Account Book. Boston, Massachusetts, 1765-1766,” *Account Books (unidentified)*, volume 4, folio vols. "A," *Account Books (Unidentified) Collection, 1703-1836*, the American Antiquarian Society, Accessed May 1, 2021. Adam Matthews, *Global Commodities Database* [http://www.globalcommodities.amdigital.co.uk.ccl.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/AAS\\_AccountBooks\\_Volume\\_4](http://www.globalcommodities.amdigital.co.uk.ccl.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/AAS_AccountBooks_Volume_4).

their lesser sales on the ledger. Additional evidence for the domination of rum in American colonial life may be seen in the writings of noted spirits historian Wayne Curtis. He writes,

In 1728, a group of backcountry surveyors in North Carolina reported finding rum nearly every place they ventured and marveled that some settlers even used it in the cooking of bacon. One tavern-keeper's books for 1774 in North Carolina showed that of 221 customers, 165 had ordered rum by itself, and another 41 ordered drinks that contained rum. In Philadelphia, the sales at the One Tun tavern for five months in 1770 show that drinks made with rum outsold all beer and wine combined.<sup>70</sup>

While startling in its sheer stature, the domination of rum in the tavern helps to underscore just how all-encompassing rum had become to the colonial way of life.

Another historian, John J. McCusker, notes that by the eighteenth century, the average American over fifteen years of age consumed just under six gallons of absolute alcohol a year.<sup>71</sup> An amount equal to about 75 bottles of 80 proof rum, or even more startlingly, five to seven shots of rum per day.<sup>72</sup> As McCusker writes, "The colonists drank in one year almost as much rum as modern Americans drink with a population nearly 100 times larger."<sup>73</sup> In 1770 the total amount of rum imported and produced by the colonies stood at 8,587,000 gallons, a rather hefty amount considering modern estimations place the American colonial population to approximately 1,700,000-2,200,000 people.<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, one should note that anywhere from three-quarters to four-fifths of that population were women and children who, for the most part, did not drink. The rate of consumption within the colonies was so great that it prompted President John Adams to

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<sup>70</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 77.

<sup>71</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 477.

<sup>72</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 76.

<sup>73</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 476.

<sup>74</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 468.

wonder, “If the ancients drank wine as our people drink rum... it is no wonder we hear of so many possessed with devils.”<sup>75</sup> While such a massive sum of rum for so few people makes it obvious that there was no way the colonists could have drunk it all, a historian still must congratulate them for trying.

Rum was unsurprisingly among the most consumed commodities in North America and thus played a significant role in connecting the American colonies to a global trade system thanks to the aforementioned Triangle Trade. When one looks to the interlinks between early rum distillers in New England, the producers of needed molasses in the Caribbean, and the purchasers of the final product both at home and abroad, a complex web of trade bringing America into contact with the wider world is found. An increased focus upon these connections reveals that a major factor in launching rum to the level of domination it reached by the Revolutionary Era, and in starting the rebellion itself, was not just the intense colonial taste for the product, but rather the simple economics involved with the production, sale, and distribution of rum at home and abroad.

As a product of industrial waste, molasses was an incredibly cheap commodity to import and consume. As the price of Caribbean sugar stabilized around 1700, it reached an average price of approximately 35 shillings per cwt.<sup>76</sup> While eighteenth-century British monetary denominations and measurements are somewhat tricky at first glance, a quick aside on them here would not be without merit. Under the non-decimalized British Monetary system, every pound sterling equated to four crowns and every crown to five

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<sup>75</sup> John Adams, *Diary 46, Various Loose Folded Sheets*, 6 August 1787 - 10 September 1796 (with Gaps), 2 July - 21 August 1804 (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2013), pp. 35-36, 35.

<sup>76</sup> Menard, “Plantation Empire,” 313.

shillings; there were then 20 shillings to every pound sterling.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, a cwt was a unit of measurement that stood for a hundredweight, weighing 112 pounds.<sup>78</sup> As such, there were approximately 8.92 cwts to the aforementioned 1,000-pound hogshead. These measurements show that if the price of sugar in 1700 was 35 shillings per cwt, a hogshead of sugar cost roughly 312.5 shillings, or more simply, £15.625. Meanwhile, molasses cost roughly £5 per hogshead and demonstrated a significant financial discount to any buyer or shipper who could load up on more product at a far cheaper price.<sup>79</sup> While refined sugar was in more demand as a readymade product, molasses served as a valuable tool to the growing number of entrepreneurs located in the New England colonies who had realized they could buy it in bulk and mass-produce rum.

Rum production in New England skyrocketed beginning in the 1690s as more and more distilleries opened to capitalize on the growing craze. In selling rum, American colonists finally had what historian Robert Russel called, “an important item of export which enabled [them]... to offset their unfavorable balance of trade with England...the backbone of New England prosperity...and the chief source of colonial wealth as it paid her balances to the English merchants.”<sup>80</sup> Between 1700-1750 Massachusetts came to boast sixty-three rum distilleries, Rhode Island thirty, with twenty-two in the city of Newport alone, and several other distillers operated as well within Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania.<sup>81</sup> Such growth was spurred, in part, by the increased demand for

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<sup>77</sup> G. L. M. Clauson, “The British Colonial Currency System.” *The Economic Journal* 54, no. 213 (1944): pp. 1-25, 14-15.

<sup>78</sup> Clauson, “The British Colonial Currency System.” *The Economic Journal* 54, no. 213 (1944): pp. 1-25, 14-15.

<sup>79</sup> *The Case of the Sugar-Trade with Regard to the Duties Intended to Be Laid on All Spirituous Liquors, Sold by Retail* (London, England: University of London’s Goldsmiths’ Library., 1736), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Robert R. Russel, *A History of the American Economic System* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), 76.

<sup>81</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 438.

native British spirits following a 1686 agreement between Louis XIV and James II that banned French brandies as part of a larger effort to curtail trade between the rival empires.<sup>82</sup> After all, British subjects still needed their spirits, and now the colonies and their rum could answer the call. Rum, as historian Louis Hacker would write, “was as magical as well as heady distillation; its fluid stream reached far Guinea, distant New Foundland, and remote Indian trading posts; it joined slaves, gold-dust, cod and mackerel, with the fortunes of New England.”<sup>83</sup> Hacker’s writing demonstrates that rum was instrumental in allowing American colonists to form the makings of an early capitalist trade system on which to sustain themselves and their colonies. Such a development meant that wealthy Americans would no longer be beholden to the foreign aid and domination that had defined the narrative of the seventeenth-century New World. Thanks to the rum trade, Americans could, at last, begin to bear the material fruits of over a half-century of settlement and take their place on the global stage. However, with the increase in colonial rum production came a few of the necessary consequences of a rapidly improved supply compared to a more gradual growth in demand. Much like with sugar earlier, such a boom in rum creation caused a corresponding decrease in price that threatened to put the already reeling sugar plantation owners of the British West Indies further under the gun by the 1730s. Plantation owners could no longer hope to export their own rums at a market rate and were now left to make up for lost profit solely through the sale of molasses. However, this was a problem for British plantation owners as there was little demand for the product outside of the British Empire, and more

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<sup>82</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 311.

<sup>83</sup> Louis Morton Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism: The Development of Forces in American History to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, Canada: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 147-153.

consequentially, not all the molasses used for colonial rum production came from British territories.

Contrary to mercantilist ideals of intra-trade solely within the empire, the vast majority of molasses in America instead came from French and Dutch Islands who had little to no rum production of their own.<sup>84</sup> Despite France having banned trade with British colonials in 1686 in favor of the *Système Exclusif*, the restriction was roundly ignored by all parties involved because as the Governor of Barbados in 1730 put it, “the French as well as the Northern Colonies find their advantage by it.”<sup>85</sup> An analysis of the total imports of molasses into the Northern Colonies in 1770 shows that of the 6,626,236 gallons of molasses imported, 87.2% or 5,777,747 gallons of it came from the French West Indies.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, 2,690,000 of these gallons were imported illegally in a blatant contradiction of imperial law.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, the Americas—from early on—threatened the controlled British mercantilist economy and, in their defiance, breached Parliament’s expectation that colonies must stay within British affiliated shipping lanes. By trading with the French and Dutch, American colonists undermined the metropolitan economic, diplomatic, and military authority of the Crown for American financial gain. The level of defiance against governing law is difficult to grasp for a modern reader, but the actions of American colonists at the time are akin to if present-day Puerto Rico or Guam decided to trade solely with U.S. enemies like Russia or North Korea. As such, the

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<sup>84</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 398.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Gov. Henry Worsley to Board of Trade, Barbados, 7 July 1730, CO 28/21:110, PPO, in *Worsley Letters, Books, and Papers 1714-1732* (Lincolnshire, UK: Lincolnshire Archives, 1996), as quoted in McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 312.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

panic in London over colonial infractions was understandable, and their desire to reign in American trade—like the American desire to break free of British control—was justifiable. Additionally, such an overwhelming inflow from a single source, an illegal one at that, raises the crucial question as to how French planters came to dominate the market and what advantages they held over their British counterparts? The answer in a simplification is cost but, when expanded, relates to the vast differences in the British and French Imperial systems and their means of taxation and governance.

The French Empire in the New World was established much along the lines of the British system. However, it suffered from a few fundamental failings that opened the door for American colonial expansion into trade with the French West Indies. While the *Système Exclusif* had sought to be a fully self-sustaining mercantilist system, this was not possible given the wayward organization of France's northern colonies.<sup>88</sup> Unlike Britain, France had not created formal governments or structures for its northern enterprises. Instead, these colonies were more akin to large trading outposts with inhabitants left to fend mainly for themselves, along with the occasional support of a French military presence.<sup>89</sup> There was little organization or planning towards the production of necessary materials, and most inhabitants aimed to make as much profit as possible as easily as possible, usually by becoming furriers or trappers.<sup>90</sup> Owing to this loose structure, the Northern colonies could not provide the necessary provisions and lumber required by the sugar islands who had devoted themselves entirely to cultivating cane. Therefore, an

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<sup>88</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 310.

<sup>89</sup> Cornelius J Jaenen, "French Expansion in North America," *The History Teacher* 34, no. 2 (February 2001): pp. 155-164, 156.

<sup>90</sup> Jaenen, "French Expansion in North America," 156.

imbalance occurred where the planters of the French islands soon found their operations unsustainable and began to look elsewhere for trading partners, with the American colonies emerging as the ideal answer.<sup>91</sup> Further skewing American trade towards the French was that, unlike the British, the French had almost no home market for the exportation of molasses. There was no French market for molasses because following heavy lobbying from the French brandy industry; Louis XV had passed a royal decree on January 24, 1713 that banned the importation or distillation of any spirits not derived from wine.<sup>92</sup> The effective result of this was to ban the production or importation of the burgeoning rum industry that had severely threatened brandy's stranglehold on the French market and to leave no avenue of molasses trade for French planters beyond American colonists.

Another key differentiator that caused American colonists to trade much more in French molasses than the English counterpart was the lack of an established rum industry on many of the French islands. Whereas planters had first distilled rum on British islands in the Caribbean and nearly every plantation had an adjoining distillery, this was not the case with many French planters. On the island of St. Dominique for example (modern-day Haiti), fewer than 10% of plantations had a distillery in 1770 thanks to the outlawing of rum distillation in France that had left no natural market to which to sell it.<sup>93</sup> Although rum production existed on other islands to a greater degree, the fact remained that there

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<sup>91</sup> Stewart Lea Mims and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, *Colbert's West India Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1912), 314-315.

<sup>92</sup> Bertie Mandelblatt, "L'alambic dans l'Atlantique. Production, commercialisation, et concurrence de c'eau-de-vie de vin et de l'eau de vie de rhum dans l'Atlantique français au dix-septième siècle et au début du dix-huitième siècle," *Histoire, économie et Société* 30, no. 2 (2011): pp. 63-78, 63.

<sup>93</sup> Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Considérations sur l'état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue: Ouvrage politique et législatif: Présenté au ministre de la marine*, vol. I (Paris, France: Grangé, 1777), 324.

was nowhere near the fiscal incentive to produce rum as compared to English planters. Therefore, French planters sought to offload their molasses at a far lower price, “two thirds less than the English,” as British planters griped in 1732, and in much larger quantities towards Americans rather than see it go to waste for zero return.<sup>94</sup> To help incentivize the foreign trade, the French West Indies also instituted an export fee on all goods at a drastically lower price than their English competitors. The French fee stood at just 1% compared to an English fee of over 4.5% during the period – a hearty fiscal incentive for any traders.<sup>95</sup> Without American colonial trade, one French planter wrote, “two-thirds of [French molasses] is at present a pure loss...for [we] are now forced to throw away [our] syrups”<sup>96</sup> As such, the planters sought, “permission to be granted to barter these syrups with the English colonies, especially those in the neighborhood of Boston, for salt, meat, and livestock for which there is great need.”<sup>97</sup> When the French planters received permission from the Crown to barter with New Englanders, or more commonly ignored the laws restricting them from trading with the Americans, the natural economics of a disparity in prices caused more and more French molasses began to flow into the American colonies to fuel its growing rum industry.

The inflow of French molasses caused British planters to lose even more of their slipping market share of exporting molasses and rum, and thus they began to lobby for ways to remove foreign from the New England trade entirely. The lobbying efforts of the

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<sup>94</sup> *A True State of the Case between the British Northern-Colonies and the Sugar Islands in America: Impartially Considered, with Respect to the Bill Now Depending in the Right Honourable the House of Lords, Relating to the Sugar Trade*, version GALE|U0107647605 at Columbia University Libraries, ( [s.l. : s.n.], 1732), 11.

<sup>95</sup> Lord John Baker Sheffield, *Observations on the Commerce of the American States* (London, UK: Printed for J. Debrett ..., 1784), 128.

<sup>96</sup> Stewart Lea Mims and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, *Colbert's West India Policy*, 221.

<sup>97</sup> Mims and Colbert, *Colbert's West India Policy*, 221.

British planters began in the 1720s as French molasses had outstripped British inflows towards the colonies and would reach a peak by the early 1730s. In 1732 the planters submitted to the King and Parliament a series of pleas and demands to more effectively ban the trade of the New England colonies with foreign settlements in what would grow to be the first true test of loyalty between colonies for the Crown since the settling of the New World. The English planters argued that the only beneficiaries of the molasses trade were foreign enemies of the state, the French and Dutch. They asserted that any profits generated from their molasses trade would surely go towards the funding of hostile militaries and therefore had to be stopped.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the British planters argued that British sugar could not compete with the French on the global markets because the French subsidized their reduced prices on sugar by way of mass exportation of molasses to New England.<sup>99</sup> They stated that this subsidy allowed the French to “undersell their sugar at least Twenty-five per-cent. cheaper than the English can afford” and left the British with no means for export abroad.<sup>100</sup>

The case of the planters was one that New Englander’s fiercely opposed, a natural stance considering the ever-rising profits of the growing rum trade and rum’s importance to the colonial economy. Accordingly, a standoff between New England and Caribbean colonials ensued where each sought to blame the other. Rather than acquiesce to the planters’ claims, the Northern Colonists asserted that New England played no role in France’s ability to undersell the market. The Americans instead stated the cause of the planter’s financial woes was their own doing, that their claims of insolvency were far

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<sup>98</sup> *A True State of the Case between the British Northern-Colonies and the Sugar Islands*, 4.

<sup>99</sup> *A True State of the Case between the British Northern-Colonies and the Sugar Islands*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

overblown, and any troubles could be avoided by even the most modest of changes in lifestyle. Colonists from New England wrote to the Crown,

But that they [the French] are enabled so to do by the Northern Colonies taking off their Molasses and Rum in Exchange for their Lumber, is what I must beg leave absolutely to deny...the true and real Causes of this Difference in Price between the British and Foreign Sugars [are] The prohibiting the French from bringing their Sugars to Barbados, an avaricious Desire in the British Planters of keeping Sugars up at an unreasonable Price, beyond what the Market can bear, and an Unwillingness to retrench in their Way of Living, which of late Years has been run up to the utmost Extravagance: for if they would be contented with a moderate Gain, or live within the Bounds of any tolerable Frugality, there would be no Foundation for their complaining.<sup>101</sup>

The difference in opinions regarding the sugar trade between New England and the British West Indies meant that for the first time, the Crown had to show favoritism and choose which colony's financial well-being was more important to the state. The answer, of course, became apparent in 1733 with the passing of the first Navigation Acts and the Molasses Act of 1733, which imposed a tax of six cents per gallon on all molasses imported into a British colony from foreign sources.<sup>102</sup>

The effect of the molasses tax would be crippling to New England's rum trade as distillers would not be able to import a sufficient quantity of molasses at a reasonable enough price to meet growing demand. The necessary rise in rum prices to offset the higher production costs would remove New England rum's ability to compete on the open market and effectively tank the entire colonial economy. Under the pricing of rum pre the Molasses Act, the sixpenny tax per gallon would effectively equate to one hundred percent of the value of the finished product on the open market – an

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<sup>101</sup> *A True State of the Case between the British Northern-Colonies and the Sugar Islands*, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Alvin Rabushka, *Taxation in Colonial America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 449.

unmanageable burden that showed whose interest the British homeland truly had at heart.<sup>103</sup> From a modern perspective, the actions of the Crown in siding with the planters are understandable. By this time, sugar was among the most important commodities to the British homeland—far greater in importance than New England rum—and supporting that commodity at any cost was prudent. Even if what the colonists claimed of the planters were true, any drop in production because of bankruptcies would be catastrophic to the home market and its ever-growing demand for sugar. Therefore, as it always does in a mercantilist system, the homeland came first, and the Crown sided with the planters to keep the sugar flowing. The Molasses Act of 1733 drew a clear line between the importance of the interests of the American Colonies and those of Britain proper and showcased that the two's financial goals were now divergent and would remain so indefinitely.

At first, American colonials were incensed: the Crown had betrayed them, and there was little hope of saving America's growing rum industry if the tax were to remain. Additionally, it was immediately apparent that the overriding purpose of the tax was not to increase the trade of British molasses, for which there remained little market. Instead, the tax served the duplicitous goal of attempting to protect the British West Indian rum industry from their Continental counterparts by removing the American competition. As historian Gilman Ostrander writes, "The chief object of the Act seems to have been to protect the mainland market for West Indian rum by depriving the New England distilleries of their source."<sup>104</sup> Luckily for the North Americans, however, the Crown

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<sup>103</sup> Rabushka, "Taxation of the New England Colonies, 1714–1739." In *Taxation in Colonial America*, 736.

<sup>104</sup> Gilman M. Ostrander, "The Colonial Molasses Trade." *Agricultural History* 30, no. 2 (1956): pp. 77-84, 78.

would prove to be incredibly ineffective in its attempts to collect the tax thanks to a mixture of smuggling, bribery, and outright imperial ineptitude. The standard price of passage through a customs officer was a farthing to a half penny per gallon, and although the royal navy sought to curtail the colonial trade, New England traders were rather cunning in their circumventions.<sup>105</sup> As historian Alvin Rabushka writes, colonial traders often flew ‘flags of truce’ during events like the Seven Years War while sailing to French islands “ostensibly to exchange prisoners of war but in fact proving a means to conduct clandestine trade.”<sup>106</sup> In its first year, the tax would yield £390 sterling; however, this number would fall to just £73 by 1738—well below the cost of collecting the tax.<sup>107</sup> When Parliament finally repealed the Act in 1764 for the broader Sugar Tax, the Crown had accumulated a total of just £13,702 in duty during the thirty-one years the law was in effect.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, the damage was done. The planters’ pushing had resulted in the first restriction of the Continental Colonies free trade and the first blatant disregard for imperial law by the colonies in their circumvention of the tax. The first steps towards the fragmentation that would break America off from the rest of the empire had been taken. It would still require a gradual series of events and greater economic hostility between the Crown and the colonial rum trade for a revolution to begin, but the slow march towards rebellion had begun.

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Accessed April 3, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3739927>.

<sup>105</sup> Rabushka, *Taxation in Colonial America*, 735.

<sup>106</sup> Rabushka, *Taxation in Colonial America*, 736.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>108</sup> Ostrander, “The Colonial Molasses Trade,” 83.

The purpose of this writing is not to say that the Molasses Act was the sole cause of the American Revolution; it must be noted that it occurred a full forty-three years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence – a verifiable lifetime in colonial terms. However, it did begin the gradual disillusionment of the New England colonists that their interests and the interests of Great Britain were akin. Even still, a large number of events still had to occur to spur the greater economic hostility that would lead to outright rebellion, most notably the Seven Years War. The conflict that historians can see as the final cataclysm that made New England rum and American independence inextricably linked as it brought light to the continuing divergent economic interests of the colonials and Great Britain.

As previously mentioned, although the Molasses Act of 1733 had made any trade with French Islands too costly to pursue on a legal basis, illicit smuggling continued *en masse*. The illegal importation of French molasses brought with it to the colonies a complex system of bribery, treachery, and lawlessness that was enough to make any reputable shipping magnate wonder if the cost was worth the risk. The whims of French governmental officials, Royal Navy officers, and continental customs agents were notoriously fickle, and it was not unusual for customs officers to impound a ship and its cargo without notice. Officials were “as changeable as the wind,” wrote one ship’s captain, and so anytime a new way of safely trading with the French arose where Continental traders could dispense of the illegal nature of the molasses and rum trade, they were sure to make quick use of it.<sup>109</sup> The only significant instance where such legal

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<sup>109</sup> Letter from William Abbot to Timothy Orne, 26 August 1763, Timothy Orne MSS., XII (Letters 1760-1820): 38, Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts, 38, as quoted in Richard Pares, *Yankees and Creoles: The*

trading occurred before the American Revolution was a direct result of the Seven Years War when the British Royal Navy conquered the French Islands of Guadalupe in 1759 and Martinique in 1762.<sup>110</sup> The conquest of these French territories created an open season for North Americans on the islands and their plantations, drastically reducing the cost of legally imported molasses.<sup>111</sup> The islands French heritage meant there was an overabundance of the product on the islands, and now that their conquest had removed the foreign excise tax, molasses could again flow freely and rapidly into North America for rum production.

Unfortunately, the days of easy profit came to an end in 1763 when the Crown returned the islands to the French, and New Englander's found themselves in the lurch as their source of cheap, legal molasses vanished seemingly overnight. The islands' return was an issue for American colonists as they had seen the economic vitalization the islands provided as a major spoil of the war with France. Moreover, along with the islands' return came the renewed Sugar Tax of 1764 and its subsequent reform of 1766. While these acts did lower the fee on imported molasses from six cents to two cents in an apparent win for New Englanders, their actual purpose was to curtail illegal trade with French Islands and suppress the American rum industry.<sup>112</sup> The reasoning behind this being that as the tax lessened, so too did the financial incentive for middlemen and shippers to handle the risks of smuggling. In turn, this would lead to more trading of

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*Trade between North America and the West Indies before the American Revolution* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), 62.

<sup>110</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 304.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>112</sup> Richard J. Trethewey, "The Economic Burden of the Sugar Act," *The American Economist* 13, no. 1 (1969): pp. 63-71, 63.

British molasses, a win for planters, and would again raise the cost of molasses available to distillers in America considering that cheap French molasses was now unavailable.<sup>113</sup> As for why planters further sought to repress the American rum trade, it was because they viewed rum as a means of alleviating some of the economic burdens which the Seven Years War had presented to the islands. There had been little trade during the war as merchants stayed home, and so planters actively began to look for ways to revive their islands' economies. Their search led many planters to settle on a boosted rum trade as the best choice for which there appeared two means.<sup>114</sup> First, by eliminating the French and Dutch, and second, by squeezing the New England rum industry out of competition. A dual focus which, by slashing the tax on molasses, allowed planters to kill two birds with one stone. The belief in such a system to help the islands can be seen in a letter to the *Providence Gazette* in 1764 that noted, "in the recent declining State of the Sugar-Islands, nothing could tend more effectually to restore the West India Trade from Ruin, than putting a Stop to the further Distillation of Rum in the British Colonies of North America."<sup>115</sup>

On account of the above, Americans saw the return of the islands and the change in tax structure as the Crown once more siding with the wealthy planters of far-off lands like Barbados over New England. The growing animosity of Continental colonials towards the planters and the Crown as a whole can be seen in an additional letter to the *Providence Gazette* just two weeks after the publishing of the former. The letter states, "The Northern Colonies are to be made the Dupes, Hewers of Wood, and Drawers of

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<sup>113</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 103.

<sup>114</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 103.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 106.

Water to a few West-India planters!” Further spurring colonial resentment was that the planters’ actions directly led to a recession of the rum trade in the colonies as the increased price of molasses drove distilleries out of business. Rhode Island, which had boasted 30 distilleries before the war, saw that number cut by a third in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, with only 20 remaining in operation from 1764 onwards.<sup>116</sup> The memory of “such halcyon days” when the French islands were under imperial control and trade was unrestricted created a unified hatred in New England for the Navigation Acts and the legislation of taxes that served only to benefit a few in distant lands.<sup>117</sup> The colonial animosity towards such laws and reforms would prompt many to disobey and wreak havoc upon British laws for the next dozen years before the Revolution as the divide between New England and America only seemed to grow wider.

That general desire to flaunt British imperial regulations meant that as the Revolution drew closer, the French West Indies were not the only sources of illicit molasses to the American colonies. Instead, Dutch and Danish holdings in the Caribbean and South America also became prominent exporters of molasses to North America over the eighteenth century. By 1770, the three foreign empires would account for 98.7% of the molasses imported to the Continental Colonies, with the French supplying 86.7% of that total – an astounding majority of a commodity that alone represented one-fifth of the total colonial imports by the same date.<sup>118</sup> A fact that serves to underscore again just how separated the financial interests of the American Colonies and Great Britain had become. Further highlighting that discrepancy in interests is the scale of colonial disregard for

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<sup>116</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 441.

<sup>117</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 305.

<sup>118</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 305.

British taxation on sugar and molasses during the same time. Again in 1770, the Crown made collections from American merchants on just £8,200 sterling from the importation of sugar and molasses, an amount £114,000 less than the £122,700 expected under the tax. Therefore, the smuggling of Caribbean goods into the Continental Colonies cost Britain in excess of at least £570,000 over the five-year period between 1766-1770 and justifiably explains Britain's growing frustrations towards the actions of its colonial inhabitants. However, while the value of lost taxation is an astounding number, it still does not accurately portray the total monetary value of the rum trade to the American Colonies. Without such an understanding, it is impossible to understand the complete extent rum and the defense of the rum trade played in spurring the colonies into revolution. As such, it is now essential to develop a fuller quantitative picture of rum's value and how that value is directly related to the founding fathers of the United States and their desires for America to break away.

By 1770 many of the early rumblings of the American Revolution were well underway. The British Crown, irate at the expenses of their colonial subjects and their now often mentioned refusal to heed any system of taxation, had steadily begun building its military and administrative presence in the colonies. A significant marker of this evolution was the British Parliament's passing of the Townshend Acts of 1767 in an attempt to exert what they believed to be Britain's "historic right to exert authority over the colonies through suspension of a recalcitrant representative assembly and through strict provisions for the collection of revenue duties."<sup>119</sup> Given the colonial stance

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<sup>119</sup> Robert J Chaffin, "The Townshend Acts of 1767," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1970): pp. 90-121, 94.

towards taxation as optional, the Townshend Acts were immediately decried by colonists everywhere, and open resistance towards them soon began. When this resistance turned physically hostile in 1768, the British Parliament dispatched two regiments of the British Army for Boston to aid in enforcing the Acts, immediately increasing the tension between Crown and Colonies. This tension would simmer for some time before finally boiling over nearly two years later when British troops fired what were arguably the first shots of the American Revolution into a crowd of colonial rioters during the Boston Massacre of March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1770.<sup>120</sup> The first man killed by these shots, and the one who would become a martyr around which the colonies could unify, was a former slave by the name of Crispus Attucks.<sup>121</sup> Attucks, like many Americans, was a man directly involved with the rum trade of North America. A sailor and a stevedore, Attucks would have played a direct part in the growing intercontinental rum trade as he loaded and unloaded any number of the millions of gallons of molasses and rum that flowed through the harbor.<sup>122</sup> When Attucks died in 1770, rum had already seen its prominent economic role in the colonies multiply significantly over eighty years and stood unequivocally as the most important commodity in North America. The only other industry comparable in economic size to the rum trade in North America was shipbuilding and even a large portion of that resulted from increased demand for international shipping thanks to rum.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> O. M. Dickerson, "The Commissioners of Customs and the 'Boston Massacre,'" *The New England Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1954): pp. 307-325, 307.

<sup>121</sup> Henry Fitz-Gilbert Waters, *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Volume 44 (Boston, MA. New England Historic Genealogical Society.1916), 382.

<sup>122</sup> Waters, *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 382.

<sup>123</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 94.

The outsized value of rum in proportion to the total economy of the American Colonies in the lead-up to the Revolution is not something that can be hyperbolized or refuted. A calculation of the balance of payments of the Continental Colonies for 1770 shows that molasses importations alone accounted for £256,000.<sup>124</sup> The size of that sum, already impressive in nature, is only rendered more apparent when one notes that it is the equivalent of 8.0% of the total debt owed to Great Britain for the year.<sup>125</sup> Meanwhile, rum importations (both legal and illegal) were of even greater value, approximately £339,000 in 1770, or over 10.6% of the amount owed to Great Britain in 1770.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, molasses and rum importations were equivalent in value to roughly one-fifth of all trade with Great Britain, by far the most of any commodity. Meanwhile, exports played an even greater role in the value they added to the colonial economy. As molasses imports were most often consumed by colonists themselves, there were negligible exports of which to speak. Rum, however, was a vastly different beast as its exports were both numerous and of considerable worth to the colonies. Of the 8,567,000 gallons of rum on hand for the colonists in 1770, 1,766,000 gallons would be exported abroad or shipped via sea between colonies.<sup>127</sup> While exporting just under 13% of all rum may not seem a substantial proportion, certainly not large enough that the restriction of trade would necessitate a rebellion, one must remember the broader economic ecosystem that rum inhabited. Rum was not an independent commodity, nor would it ever be. Instead, rum served as the lynchpin of a broader trade system upon which the North Atlantic triangle

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<sup>124</sup>George N. Clark, *Guide to English Commercial Statistics, 1696 - 1782* (London, UK: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1938), 7.

<sup>125</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 400.

<sup>126</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 404.

<sup>127</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 474-475, Table VIII-2.

trade of the eighteenth century relied. As anyone who has spent any length of time in the American education system can recite with unfortunate ease: Rum, molasses, and sugar went one way, lumber foodstuffs, and textiles another, and in return from the final came the horror of the African slave trade. Rum was what made all of this trade possible as it was the one commodity that all parties wanted and the one that, as discussed, made financial ends meet. Therefore, as McCusker aptly stated, “a consistent pattern of parliamentary legislation circumscribing the markets for rum exported from the Continental Colonies [in any quantity] threatened not only the small trade in the one commodity but hampered the colonists’ export trade in general.”<sup>128</sup> Additionally, it was not just the restriction of the broader rum trade that angered American colonists, but it was the previously noted favoritism demonstrated to the West Indian planters in doing so that infuriated colonists. The efforts of the planters to enact the Molasses and Sugar Acts that had targeted the American rum trade did not simply dissipate following their passage or removal. Instead, the trade war remained relatively constant in the fifteen years before the American Revolution as the planters continually sought to snuff out their competition. These efforts culminated in the Quebec Revenue Act of 1774, which closed the lucrative Canadian rum trade from the American colonials while at the same time creating one on a preferred basis for West Indian traders.<sup>129</sup> Such actions isolated American colonists from their northern brethren in the lead-up to the Revolution and simultaneously revealed to many why rebellion was needed. Indeed, the fallout of the Quebec Revenue Act can be prominently observed in the writings of John Hancock two years later when he decried

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<sup>128</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 479.

<sup>129</sup> J. Harvey Perry, *Taxation in Canada (3rd Edition)* (University of Toronto Press, 1951), 118.

“acts of pretended legislation...cutting off our trade with all parts of the world” in a somewhat important document regarding the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence.<sup>130</sup> It should, of course, be mentioned that John Hancock was also involved in the spirits trade, both legal and illegal, having seen a ship of his trading flotilla, the *Liberty*, impounded and seized in 1768 for smuggling madeira and rum.<sup>131</sup>

Exports, however, are only part of the equation regarding the rum trade as the domestic side was also of considerable value. The importance of domestic trade is apparent since, as noted, well over 80% of the rum produced or imported remained within the colonies. As such, rum at home, specifically the previously mentioned import and now production of rum, was financially vital. The distilleries of New England that made continental rum represented everything that was the antithesis of the mercantilist doctrine for which Great Britain had founded the colonies. Instead, the New England distilleries were perhaps the best example of the defiant economic self-interest slowly manifesting in the New World. The distilleries operated in direct opposition to the envisioned market by turning a raw material, molasses, into a refined product, rum, and never once paying dues to the imperial homeland. American colonists founded the distilleries with colonial investment, operated them with colonial workers, and the profits they turned served to benefit Americans alone. Moreover, given that the costs of a single gallon of rum immediately following the Revolution stood at roughly \$18.55 per gallon in today's

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<sup>130</sup> Harvey, *Taxation in Canada*, 129.

<sup>131</sup> Hancock would face trial for the incident, however, defended by John Adams he was acquitted with the sole reprimand coming at the financial cost of having his ship and goods, valued at near \$7,000,000 in 2021, permanently repossessed by the Royal Navy. For more information see O. M. Dickerson, “John Hancock: Notorious Smuggler or Near Victim of British Revenue Racketeers?” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 32, no. 4 (1946): pp. 517-540.

value, there were considerable profits to be made.<sup>132</sup> Further augmenting these profit levels, and therefore, rum's importance to the colonial economy was the amount of rum produced and in turn sold by these distilleries was no small number. A naval officer for the Port of New York wrote in 1768 that the *average* distillery in Manhattan produced 45,000 gallons of rum a year.<sup>133</sup> One prominent distillery owned by the Brown Brothers (who would go on to found Brown University) in Providence could distill 160,000 gallons a year.<sup>134</sup> In 1770, the Continental Colonies would distill over 4,807,000 gallons of rum from 118 distilleries, the equivalent of more than 2.2 gallons per person, the proceeds of which would solely line American pockets.<sup>135</sup>

However, much like the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, owning and operating a commercial rum distillery was no inexpensive or risk-free endeavor. It required substantial capital to outfit, staff, and maintain a distillery on par with one of the Brown Brothers' size, and thus any shocks or disturbances to the free flow of rum trade could be calamitous. Therefore, it is understandable that when Britain threatened that trade to support West Indian planters, distillers preferred to turn to rebellion than see their livelihoods vanish. As wealthy men prominent in the public space of society, distillery owners and rum shippers would have a massive impact on the early steps of the Revolution. After all, these men had the most to lose yet also the financial means to create a platform to defend themselves. An example of the immense impact of rum

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<sup>132</sup> Carroll D. Wright, *Comparative Wages, Prices, and Cost of Living* [From the Sixteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor for 1885.] (Boston, Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1889), 139.

<sup>133</sup> Virginia D. Harrington, "Williams to the Board of Trade, New York, 22 December 1768," in *The New York Merchant on the Eve of the Revolution* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 270.

<sup>134</sup> James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations: The Nineteenth Century* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1968), 311-312.

<sup>135</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 435.

distillation on spurring the independence movement comes from Massachusetts as the state produced more than 2,000,000 gallons of the 8,000,000 gallons of rum in the colonies in 1770. Such a high figure in the state most actively involved with the early rebellion showcases the link between the state's history as the birthplace of the American Revolution and the prominent role of a few wealthy, angry men involved with the production of the spirit. Consequentially, the delineation of such a link between rum and rebellion only serves to make rum's place as the forgotten spirit of revolution all the more perplexing.

Joining in rebellion with the merchants and distillers of the colonies would be the tavern-keepers of America. A slightly less wealthy crowd but one who still relied mightily on a ready and cheap supply of rum to make a living. As it turns out, rum's economy did not only benefit the rich but also some of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of colonial society. This was in large part thanks to the ability of anyone, man or woman, to obtain a license cheaply and become a tavern-keeper—a trade that promised a reasonably comfortable living to anyone who could stay in business. Two of Philadelphia's first six tavern-keepers were women, and from any point in the city's colonial history women managed approximately a quarter of Philadelphia's taverns as widows were often granted licenses as a means to stay financially solvent.<sup>136</sup> However, most critical to rum's influence on tavern-keeping was that the cost of obtaining a partial license, where a tavern could only sell small batches of rum or beer, was far cheaper. These partial licenses were the only ones obtainable to more impoverished people and a

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<sup>136</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 42.

genuine way to attain economic stability.<sup>137</sup> Partial licenses were common in states like Pennsylvania from 1704 onwards, where the annual cost of £2 10s. was far more palatable to average entrepreneurs than the £5 per annum to serve wine and other spirits.<sup>138</sup> Thus, rum's influence on the colonial middle class and the elite meant both would have a stake should its trade be restricted, and suddenly, a very sizable, very influential portion of the American population had a stake in the game. The overwhelming influence of the rum trade on America's founding fathers is evident everywhere, from the membership of the Sons of Liberty, the radical rebellion group responsible for the Boston Tea Party, to the signatories of the Declaration of Independence. As of 1769, Boston had about ninety licensed taverns; of these, twenty license holders were members of the Sons of Liberty.<sup>139</sup> Of Boston's twenty-eight distillers and wine merchants, just seven remained loyal to the Crown.<sup>140</sup> Meanwhile, nearly half of the same group were actively involved with the Sons of Liberty.<sup>141</sup> As historian David Conroy writes, "The manufactures and importers of the most controversial commodity in the province and the colonial world stood at the very helm of the resistance movement."<sup>142</sup>

By throwing their lot in with rebellion, the tavern-keepers, distillers, and merchants of America put their livelihoods at risk. As the British navy blockaded colonial harbors and restricted trade, the inflow of rum and molasses slowed to a trickle. One

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<sup>137</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 25.

<sup>138</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 26.

<sup>139</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 106.

<sup>140</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 107.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>142</sup> David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 257.

colonial estimated that distillers in the city of Boston alone lost £6,000 in income each week.<sup>143</sup> Thus, this industrial middling-sorts class of society had to be sure of at least a spirited fight when they joined the Revolution, and for that, they would need even more public support. After all, a few wealthy men ranting about unfair taxation is hardly the stuff of revolutions unless all classes join in on the fight against tyranny. Fortunately for the rebels, rum happened to be a tremendous unifier: a propaganda tool whose unjust treatment by British legislation proved to be the perfect lightning rod for American society. Rum was the drink of all classes, rich and poor, it was the spirit that had made colonists feel real success in the New World, and anything that hampered a man's access to rum hampered his access to the joys of liberty itself. But what made rum such a unifier for American rebels and such an easy tool of political union? Yes, colonials loved rum and drank more than any humans ever should—a fact that has been duly noted—but that alone does not a revolution make. People share a love for many things and often do not join together to defend them. Furthermore, the idea of the common man rising up to protect the economic interests of a select few sounds profoundly un-American, a rejection of American society's current norms and values, yet that is what happened. In order to understand why this occurred and, more broadly, how rum played such an important role in the American Revolution, one must move past just the economic aspects of rum to the broader societal influence of the spirit. More specifically, the dialogue and forums surrounding rum's consumption in the colonies, most frequently in taverns, as a unique aspect of the American colonies. With rum as their lubricant, taverns were the centers of all political discourse in America, between men of all classes. Without taverns and rum,

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<sup>143</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 107.

there could be no progression of the American Revolution from one of We the Few to one of We the People. Therefore, a thorough examination of the culture of American taverns and rum's place in those taverns in creating the unifying dream of the American Revolution is now well warranted.

## Chapter Two

### ***Politics and Pints: The Role of Taverns and Rum in the Advent of Political Discourse in America***

“Thomas Jefferson sat at the Indian Queen Tavern in Philadelphia facing a blank sheet of parchment. Taking a long drink of his freshly poured ale, he touched his pen to paper and scratched, ‘When in the course of human events . . . .’”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Jack Smith, “Thomas Jefferson Declared Under the Influence,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-10-vw-227-story.html>.

To say that the tavern was anything less than the vibrant, beating heart of colonial American social culture would be akin to saying that the sky is not blue, or the earth is not round—an obvious fallacy in need of correction and perhaps even retrospection on the part of the speaker. As respected tavern historian Peter Thompson writes, “Taverns were the most enduring, most identifiable, and most contested body of public space in eighteenth-century America.”<sup>145</sup> Put simply; taverns were everywhere in colonial America and with good reason. Taverns were often the single most important building in small rural settlements, churches excluded, and places of vital import in more metropolitan dwellings. Without a tavern, a city lacked a civil center, a place where colonists of almost all backgrounds could congregate, drink their precious rum, and discuss with one another on a public stage. Colonial taverns were a place where men, rich and poor, came together, drawn by a mutual affinity to imbibe and for the public space unlike any other in the world at the time. Nearly every village or settlement of matter in colonial America had a tavern as they offered a place where “travelers and locals alike could find a meal, a bed, a dram of rum, a place by the fire in winter, and drinking companions year-round.”<sup>146</sup> Additionally, taverns played an essential role in the early judicial system of colonial and independent America as judges riding upon the circuit, wherein judges traveled all across the colonies and states hearing cases given the lack of centralized courts, relied upon them for lodging and sustenance during their lengthy travels.<sup>147</sup> In 1656, Massachusetts made it mandatory for every town to have a licensed

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<sup>145</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 19.

<sup>146</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 77.

<sup>147</sup> James E. Pfander, “Judicial Compensation and the Definition of Judicial Power in the Early Republic,” *Northwestern Scholars* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Law Review Association, October 1, 2008), 23.

tavern to support such a system, and in New York and Maryland, similar laws existed requiring that each tavern have at least one room with “a good feather bed” for judges to retire.<sup>148</sup> Throughout the colonies where one could find a courthouse, there usually stood a tavern next door; in fact, the taverns often served as courthouses themselves given their natural advantage of being preheated and readily equipped with certain desired refreshments.<sup>149</sup> All of this played a role in creating an atmosphere of civil discourse and politics within taverns that means it is no stretch to say that without taverns, the American Revolution may never have been the broader social movement it came to represent.

As such, an examination of the role of taverns, and by extension rum as their most favored item, is needed. Why did taverns become places of such social and cultural import? How did they serve to bring men of a variety of classes together and to create a broader culture of political discussion that was uniquely American at the time? What impact did this all have on beginning the Revolution, and what part does rum have to play? These are questions that the remainder of this chapter seeks to address in five principal parts: first, this chapter shall discuss what created the intense colonial affinity for taverns and how taverns’ place in what is known as the public sphere played a role. Second, by analyzing this placement within the public sphere and the mixed clientele of taverns, this section shall address how taverns created a second nature of political discourse within the American colonies. Third, there will be a description of how colonial America’s social, economic, and legislative environments allowed for the unique

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<sup>148</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 77.

<sup>149</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 77.

egalitarian establishments mentioned above. Next, there will then be an examination of the various ways people interacted in taverns and how this aided in the political nature of taverns. Last, taverns and rum as a setting for propaganda and the Revolution will be discussed, and in doing so, this chapter shall demonstrate the profound importance of both in creating a colonial society that was ready for rebellion.

Taverns themselves, a place for men or women to come together and purchase food and spirits, were not, obviously, an American exception. Taverns had existed in Europe for centuries and were a familiar and beloved part of the landscape of Northwestern Europe from which many of America's first settlers came.<sup>150</sup> After all, the much-discussed love for drinking among white colonial males described in the previous chapter of this text meant there was a corresponding and perhaps equal love for the institutions one could frequent to obtain the liquors necessary to do so. Since the first settlements of North America, taverns had played a critical role in the societies of New World inhabitants as a place to gather and drink with one another after a long day's work. No new settlement could be seen as complete or successful if it did not have a tavern, and much emphasis was placed early on in the colonies on ensuring this critical juncture of society would be readily available to settlers without delay. The importance of taverns to new settlements was such that in the example of one Moravian settlement located in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, the settlers went so far as to ask church elders to build a tavern before they set about building a church.<sup>151</sup> The settlers' arguments defending such a peculiar petition for a religious settlement to make was that "a community without public

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<sup>150</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 3.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

houses was like *Hamlet* without the ghost,” simply untenable.<sup>152</sup> Numerous second-wave colonies such as Pennsylvania saw taverns founded within the first year of their settlement, and many of the first laws passed within these colonies focused on the regulation and maintenance of these taverns. The earliest of these laws again comes from Pennsylvania, where much of the examination of taverns in this chapter will take place, and dates to 1683, one year after settlement when William Penn sought to create the first commission in the colony for the express purpose of monitoring the needed expansion of taverns.<sup>153</sup> Further demonstrating the prominent role taverns played in colonial social life is the sheer number of taverns present in cities such as Pennsylvania immediately after their founding and the haste with which that number grew in the city compared to a relatively pedestrian growth in inhabitants. For example, by 1683, there were already two taverns in Philadelphia, and in 1686 that number had grown to six.<sup>154</sup> Most telling, however, is that by 1756 the number of taverns in Philadelphia stood at one hundred and one licensed premises for just over 21,000 people.<sup>155</sup> A ratio of more than one for every two hundred people and a per capita representation of taverns greater than such old-world metropolises as Rotterdam and Paris.<sup>156</sup>

Most taverns in colonial America were simple places and served a clear purpose, providing drinks, sustenance, and lodging to those in need. Early colonial taverns often consisted of one room with a single communal table, around which patrons gathered to

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<sup>152</sup> Joseph J. Kelley, *Life and Times in Colonial Philadelphia: Joseph J. Kelley* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1973), 163.

<sup>153</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 9.

<sup>154</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 2.

<sup>155</sup> “The People,” Colonial and Early American Philadelphia, accessed May 2, 2021, <http://colonialphiladelphia.blogs.wm.edu/the-people>.

<sup>156</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 2.

share stories and drinks out of either pewter cups or a single large bowl. Additionally, thanks to early regulations that limited the price at which tavern-keepers could sell their spirits, there was often little difference in clientele.<sup>157</sup> Wealthy and poor colonials alike gathered in the same places paying the same prices, thus drawing together what Peter Thompson would describe as “a wide variety of backgrounds in conditions of enforced intimacy” that would define the American taverngoing experience.<sup>158</sup> The prevalence of taverns and their general setup, however, does not inform why exactly colonials so frequently sought the tavern or how the tavern functioned as a microcosm of society at large. To understand why American colonials so sought the tavern, it is vital to understand their perception of the public sphere in general and the role taverns could play within that sphere as a unique public space.

As historian Roger Chartier writes, one of the reasons taverns became so dominant was that a “fascination with publicness” gripped peoples in Europe and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>159</sup> Men and women who had spent generations inventing and investing meaning in the private self desired a means of projecting that self onto the world for which taverns were the perfect medium. Moreover, by projecting said image into the public domain, taverngoers believed they could begin to shape the society around them to that image by making it the most widely accepted form in the public domain. Taverngoers held such a belief because, as Thompson again writes, “They identified taverngoing as a powerful form of sociability, within whose ambit lay

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<sup>157</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 3.

<sup>158</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 3.

<sup>159</sup> Roger Chartier and Lydia G. Cochrane, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 195.

changing attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors that constituted the very marrow of the culture of [their society].”<sup>160</sup> Therefore, if the patrons of a tavern could define the culture within as one of their choosing, then broader society’s culture would soon become one and the same. The reason taverns could greatly influence the public domain was that in many smaller settlements, taverngoing was as much a choice as a necessity since taverns were the only place for communal gathering beyond the church – a place not often known for its bonhomie atmosphere.<sup>161</sup> However, even in larger settlements and cities, taverngoing was still the dominant form of sociability despite there being a plethora of options, meaning that regardless of where one lived, taverns would figure prominently in the public sphere and the perception of accepted norms and cultures.<sup>162</sup> This ability of taverns to impact culture on a societal scale meant that even the most private of settlers or those disinclined under normal circumstances to visit a drinking house felt compelled to visit these establishments to help shape the accepted norms of the public sphere. Hence why colonists of all sorts filled the taverns of colonial America with everyone from Quakers, to magistrates, to sailors frequenting them as each “felt the need to demonstrate something of the quality of their beliefs to a wider world.”<sup>163</sup>

However, before any further discussion of taverns as the center of the public sphere in colonial life, understanding what precisely the concept of a public sphere is and the role of taverns as a public space within that sphere is essential to any understanding of colonial society. While public space can consist of many things: town squares,

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<sup>160</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 3-4.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

riverbanks, streets, and more, taverns were a unique form of public space for colonial Americans. Unlike any other space, taverns brought together rich, poor, and middling people as a mutual affinity and desire for spirits among all classes drew them together. Moreover, taverns operated in a unique standing for public spaces in that they were neither fully public nor were they private. Anyone could walk into a tavern, and yet it was a fully enclosed space and often one with limited capacity. What was said within the walls of a public house could only be heard by those present, a temporary fraternity of equals, and yet, the setting was still far different than one's home or a private meeting as anyone could enter. This mixture of public and private created a space where political ideas could flow as there was little fear of retribution from the outside, but it also meant unknown opponents within could hotly contest them. As such, taverns were always a breeding ground for political discourse, and the culture of political dialogue that they enabled was a fundamental part of allowing ideas of independence to form and spread their way across the colonies.

In addition, it is of the utmost importance to compare and contrast the idea of a public space like the tavern, as put forth here, with the concept of the public sphere put forth by Jürgen Habermas in his seminal work on eighteenth-century European coffeehouses, *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*. While Habermas seeks to present the appearance of a bourgeois public sphere existing in two forms: as the driver of a culture of rational public discussion from within an elite civil society, and as the partial realization of such an idea within a society, the space which Habermas exams is quite

different from the public space of colonial America.<sup>164</sup> For one, the coffee houses of Europe were a different entity from American taverns, both in the substance of personages within and in the type of goods consumed. While recent scholarship has reflected that coffeehouses were more diverse and middling than previously thought, America's taverns were still much egalitarian in nature. The relative youth of the colonies and their democratic values meant there was little to no place for the strict classist post-feudal system that defined Europe and prevented such equality in European coffeehouses. People of all classes mingled in taverns of the same ilk, and for much of the lead up to the Revolution, there were no removed places of public space in which elites alone could congregate like some of the coffeehouses Habermas examines.<sup>165</sup> The difference in conversations over cups of coffee among elite equals compared to the fracas of words exchanged between classes high and low over in-toxifying rum will be very different and somewhat incomparable in nature. As Thompson writes, whereas Habermas "invites a reader to consider the emergence and the function within civil society in eighteenth-century Europe of a set of relatively inflexible rational-critical assumptions and practices... the term public space with regards to taverns is used to indicate the ethnographic origins and emphasis of a range of changing forms of tavern behaviors and interactions."<sup>166</sup> The general takeaway one should have when understanding Habermasian themes and how they relate to taverns as public space is, in short, that public space is

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<sup>164</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, edited and translated by Thomas Burger, and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2020), 84-87.

<sup>165</sup> Habermas, *The Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 30-44.

<sup>166</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 17.

shared space, and as such, a variety of colonials from many backgrounds sought to use public spaces like taverns in ways that were often in conflict with one another.<sup>167</sup>

Taverns and public spaces in general, according to Habermas, are necessarily oppositional. That is to say that they provide a space for people to share common political, economic, and cultural interests that are outside the state's encroachment in a space entirely their own. Thus, the final key difference between Habermasian public spaces and the taverns of colonial America is that taverns in America were spaces that free individuals could gather for critical discussion and thought apart from the state, but they were also a fulcrum for the inner workings of the state. Judges resided in taverns and held court in them, drafts of legal documents were revised in them, and proclamations for the state were decreed in taverns. Taverns occupied an intersection of society between the public sphere and the state that made them a unique establishment unlike any explored by Habermas or other scholars of similar thought. This intersection makes taverns pivotal to the foundations of the American Revolution and reveals just how widespread an impact taverns and rum had in inspiring rebellion.

A public sphere like the ones provided by Habermas could only have emerged in colonial taverns if all those gathered managed to share common ideals and if only one group managed to achieve the concept of ownership of a public domain. However, this was never the case with eclectic taverns. Additionally, Habermasian coffeeshops are predicated on the elite of society joining together alone to share in debate and think critically about civil order, something which the colonial elite resolutely refused to do in more exclusive venues where their ideas would not be met by popular opposition or

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<sup>167</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 18.

vetted by public opinion as they were in shared taverns.<sup>168</sup>When colonial elites did discuss matters such as politics, they often disagreed with one another fervently and with as much violence as the lowest of laborers.<sup>169</sup>In summation, as Thompson again writes, “even within the category of colonial society that could be described as ‘bourgeois,’ there was at best a limited acceptance of Habermas’s normative ideal of rational public discussion.”<sup>170</sup>

However, this is not to say that none of Habermas’s ideals were represented in the colonies or that Habermasian themes did not develop in taverns by the end of the American Revolution. As the eighteenth century progressed, more and more tavern assemblies came to remove themselves from people of different backgrounds and unify around similar causes. Such unifying certainly played a role in elites of the Revolution joining together as they sought to disassociate from certain others and instead only join around the idea of independence from Great Britain. These desires of disassociation spurred changes in dialogue as well as consumption at certain taverns. Those catered to a more elite, and in turn revolutionary, clientele came to begin serving more complex drinks; usually, rum punch served in ornate silver as a means of showcasing their desires and stature. Thus, even when used to signify a breaking from common people, taverns, and more importantly, rum remained a constant in colonial life and a symbol for revolution by American elites. However, the self-segregation of elites is not to say that only the upper class would have a say in revolution. The egalitarian nature of taverns prevented that. While some citizens could remove themselves and attempt to direct the

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<sup>168</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 18.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

flow of conversation, taverns were still institutions that any white, working-class member of colonial society could enter. The convergence of the different class and beliefs of men meant that as Thompson writes, “Tavern assemblies in which men from different ranks and ethnicities discussed politics in an atmosphere free from deference had helped create...in the first two-thirds of the eighteenth-century, a political culture uncommonly open to the influence of laboring men.”<sup>171</sup> As such, taverns and the revolution that came from them would both be influenced by common people and elites, resulting in a nation that was startlingly democratic in its foundation.

Returning to the broader topic of the importance of taverns regarding larger colonial culture, however, is that as the definer of accepted norms in the public sphere, any group seeking to impact civil society had to conduct much of their business within said taverns. Although voluntary civil organizations usually entail tidy and detailed discussions among individuals sharing a common purpose, the associations of colonial America worked in a manner quite the opposite. American associations operated as such because when faced with the absurdity of either adhering to such standards and meeting privately, wherein their motives might be misunderstood as subversive, or forgoing these norms to work in the cramped and distracting standards of a tavern so other citizens would see their work as legitimate and in the public interest, colonial associations chose the latter without fail.<sup>172</sup> Therefore, existing within taverns was a large and influential interest group of men whose aim was to enhance and change the civil society at large. Thanks to this, an ample amount of political discourse between these men and others took

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<sup>171</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 19.

<sup>172</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 9.

place within taverns that could slowly but surely begin to affect America at large. As David Conroy writes, “taverns became a public stage upon which colonists resisted, initiated, and addressed changes in their society. Indeed, in these houses men gradually redefined their relationships with figures of authority,” and in so doing, became figures of authority themselves.<sup>173</sup> Thus, by all intents and purposes, taverns were *the* breeding grounds for political ideals and oppositions as conversations between varying interest groups and associations took place within their walls. These conversations then fermented a larger culture of political discourse necessary to spread ideals of rebellion within American taverns as these groups came together or clashed with one another for control of the public sphere.

Not everyone, of course, was a fan of taverns nor wanted them to define American civil life. Many, especially the women and clergy who represented the growing temperance movement of the mid-eighteenth century, came to see taverns as beastly dens of drunken disorder that should have nowhere near the standing they did in society. However, as mentioned, even those disinclined to frequent taverns understood that tavern sociability held a distinct power to augment and shape society in their frequenters’ image. Therefore, even these people felt the need to wade in from time to time and enter the discourse or risk their voices never being heard. To counter the influence of verbal discourse in taverns, however, these same people sought to shine an unfavorable light by comparing the virtues of conversations within to the written text. Nevertheless, what these attempts reveal is the proper scope that tavern discourse had on increasing the political knowledge of the colonial world around it. Not only in shaping the discussions

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<sup>173</sup> Conroy, *In Public Houses*, 11.

of taverngoers but also in the production, distribution, and consumption of the very writings that people had sought to use to remove taverns as the dominant form of political engagement. Writings that figured prominently in a broad colonial desire for independence and further prove the impact of taverngoing, and by extension rum (as the most consumed drink of choice at taverns), in beginning the American Revolution.

The reason taverns are so critical in distributing writings that helped to begin the American Revolution and why the plan to use such writings to look down on taverngoing was foolhardy lies in how critical taverns were in the consumption and production of such writings. Part of the reason taverns were critical to the distribution and consumption of writing is that the discussion of written pieces within permitted much faster dissemination of information than standard literature being bought, sold, and read allowed. More importantly, however, taverns and other places of communal discussion allowed for the ideas of texts to be digested, distributed, and built upon by audiences that otherwise may never have been able to read them. An especially essential fact since a still significant portion of the colonial population was illiterate in the years before the Revolution. One study on literacy rates in the American Colonies found that between 1758 and 1776, the average hovered around 67.81% in rural areas while urban centers averaged closer to 84.2%.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, since taverns in rural areas, where illiteracy was most frequent, were the chief and often only place of communal social gathering, these establishments played a crucial role in exposing information to those who could not have read them via oral discussion. Moreover, as Thompson again writes regarding the

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<sup>174</sup> F. W. Grubb, "Growth of Literacy in Colonial America: Longitudinal Patterns, Economic Models, and the Direction of Future Research," *Social Science History* 14, no. 4 (1990): pp. 451-482, 453-454.

importance of taverns on the creation of such written works, “public houses were wellsprings of indigenous textual production in [places like] Philadelphia, and many pamphlets and newspaper features mirrored tavern speech precisely in order to sway a readership that continued to hold oral discourse in high regard.”<sup>175</sup> Therefore, taverns were essential in disseminating the information of written works and in creating such works as many of these pieces were written to reflect the more broadly and accepted vernacular of tavern discussions. It is not a bold point to state that without the shared public consumption and discussion of literature in taverns, there could never have been the mass understanding of seminal writings that would sway the American Revolution. For example, *Common Sense* became the broadly known and inflammatory piece it was not because everyone in the colonies read it, but because it was discussed and argued over in taverns across America as its message spread like wildfire on the back of group discussion.

Another intriguing aspect of the social role of taverns in creating the American Revolution comes from their place as a favored institution of classes both high and low. As has been noted, nearly every enfranchised citizen in colonial America went to taverns. “Colonial America’s ministers, assemblymen, and men of learning were themselves taverngoers...[and] as a result, the frontier between ‘popular’ culture and official or ‘high’ culture was far from distinct in colonial America.”<sup>176</sup> This amalgamation of high and popular culture is one of the factors that helps to explain the previous quandary of how the economic revolution of a few described in the previous chapter could be joined

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<sup>175</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 10.

<sup>176</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 12-13.

in by the many come 1776. The place of taverns as a shared tentpole of culture for all politically influential male parties meant that numerous groups felt the sting of British encroachment when the price of rum was raised by British taxation in the years prior. All interest groups of the white, male colonial populace felt threatened when these price increases hampered the existence of such treasured establishments, and so more and more members of the populace began to favor revolution rather than lose their taverns. The role of taverns in spurring not only independence but the democratic ideals which would come to define American values is again not something that one may overlook. An interesting point of note that helps showcase such a link between taverns and democratic values is that there tended to be more democratic practices in the initial legislature of states with a higher proportion of taverns. For example, Pennsylvania, which held the most taverns per capita, created a first state constitution that was “arguably the most radical and democratic statement of political values that the American Revolution produced.”<sup>177</sup> Meanwhile, this was in contrast to states with fewer taverns like Massachusetts, which created initial constitutions that disenfranchised poor white males who had been eligible to vote under British rule.<sup>178</sup> As such, historians may see an obvious correlation, albeit not causation, between taverns and liberty where further evidence could be of use.

Partly due to such correlation and in an attempt to define causation, much has been written on the links between public drinking in taverns and the brewing of revolutionary political ideas. One such study, by Thomas Brennan, situates itself in

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<sup>177</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 13.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

eighteenth-century France and studies the appeal of public drinking in Paris at the time from a customer's perspective. Brennan finds that public drinking in taverns recreated "an essential communion amongst men, a ritualistic consumption and sharing which created solidarity among patrons and affirmed mutual values."<sup>179</sup> An occurrence that in eighteenth-century America was likely very similar, except that the patrons in the colonies were much more varied in nature thanks to the much greater representation of all socioeconomic classes in American taverns. As such, it should be assumed that a much wider variety of values were likely to be incorporated. Brennan continues that culture created in these taverns appropriated the values of a non-present elite, creating in their frequenters a shared basis of beliefs and desires around which a rebellion could form.<sup>180</sup> When one applies such a narrative to the foundations of the American Revolution, it again becomes clear how a similar if not increased appropriation of values would play a direct role in uniting all manner of classes in the American Revolution as a desire for the values of all such peoples to be protected and enhanced under a democratic and self-determining state became prevalent.

One unfortunate drawback when attempting to ascertain the effect taverns had on forming the American Revolution as well as its democratic values, however, is the lack of female representation within their limits. Women certainly played a role in the founding of America's rebellion; however, their presence in taverns was less decisive. While some women did visit taverns, it was far more infrequent, and most records of the era stem wholly from a male account. All the same, nearly a third of all colonial tavern-keepers

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<sup>179</sup> Thomas Edward Brennan, *Public Drinking and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>180</sup> Brennan, *Public Drinking in Paris*, 8.

were women, in part thanks to the colonies' propensity to grant licenses to women as a means to keep widowed or impoverished women afloat, and so they represented a sizable and influential portion of the tavern owning population.<sup>181</sup> All of this also goes without saying that women were half the populace, and to say half the populace had no effect would be foolish and close-minded. Therefore, while taverns are a valuable tool for understanding the propellant behind the Revolution, they do invariably leave something to be desired. As such, any assumptions made regarding the overall importance of taverns on the Revolution, no matter how overwhelming the evidence, must keep the lack of female representation in mind. There is still a need in the historiography of the era for a monograph regarding the role of women in the tavern trade to be written. Sadly, this is something which, given the current limitation of resources, is not possible for a paper of this length.

Moving on, although reference has repeatedly been made about the egalitarian and eclectic representation within taverns of the white, male subcategory of colonial society, understanding the complete economic, social, and legislative factors that forced such a diversity of interests would be of some use. As has been mentioned, many colonial taverns faced a regulatory machine that set maximum retail prices, and as such, the maximum profits for a tavern. Therefore, most tavern-keepers had neither the incentive nor the funds to choose between ranks of the social hierarchy to serve.<sup>182</sup> Anyone who could pay for their drams was welcome—status be damned. (Excluding, of course, slaves, Indians, and many people of color because while tavern-keepers could not be classist,

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<sup>181</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 41.

<sup>182</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 76.

they still often managed to be racist). Such a system inherently meant that the rich and poor would frequently gather in the same places to consume their drams, and little could be done to control the company of the tavern. Granted, the lack of crowd control was only provided if those within were not already part of a disenfranchised or disadvantaged societal group, in which case, it was far more possible and frequent.

Further adding to the intermix of classes in taverns was that in more cosmopolitan places, like Philadelphia, the city block which a single tavern might have served was often home to men and women of vastly different economic background meaning a tavern-keeper could readily expect to serve an eclectic group of customers.<sup>183</sup> For example. A 1690 ledger from the keeper of the Pennypot tavern in Pennsylvania shows that Joshua Carpenter, the second richest man in Philadelphia, drank there alongside the workers from the previously mentioned James West's shipyard.<sup>184</sup> Additionally, at the popular One Tun Tavern in 1770, city assessors, a ship's captain, John West, and a visiting dignitary from the Carolinas are noted to have been served simultaneously to the owner Joseph Ogden's servants and maids.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, most urban colonials did not drink at just one tavern, and when afforded the chance, tended to bounce from place to place and expose themselves to different settings and groups within. Evidence for such behavior can be seen in the accounts of Thomas Penn speaking of one of his compatriots running up accounts, or "scores" at various establishments and from the diaries of

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<sup>183</sup> Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 3-21.

<sup>184</sup> West and Marlow. Account Book, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, cited in Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 227.

<sup>185</sup> Joseph Ogden, Innkeeper's Account Book, 1769-1771, included with West and Marlow, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, cited in Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 227.

numerous Philadelphians as they underwent what can only be described as an eighteenth-century pub crawl by visiting no less than ten taverns in a single night.<sup>186,187</sup>

While men and women of certain classes would have obviously enjoyed interacting with people of similar social standing, it is apparent that most citizens of colonial America nonetheless regularly visited taverns whose base clients were far different from themselves. This confluence of factors driving different social and economic groups together provided the foundation for some degree of interaction between classes, cultures, and religions. It was the basis for the broader social environment that allowed for the notion of an American rebellion to become widely accepted among competing interest groups.<sup>188</sup> Additionally, the impact of price regulation in curating a more diverse group of patrons within taverns reveals the broader factor of other tavern governances in achieving the same ends. In essence, American taverns were egalitarian, especially compared to European equivalents, because they were far more regulated and some of colonial America's most stringently controlled endeavors. Colonial elites were fearful of the drunken revelry that might occur among the lower classes if left to their own devices, and so sought to strictly curtail and control the company, manner, and public spaces in which one could drink.<sup>189</sup> The hours when drinking was permitted were strictly regulated, popular past times such as gambling or

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<sup>186</sup> Thomas Penn, "Letters of Thomas Penn to Richard Hockley, 1746-1748," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 40, no. 2 (1916): pp. 222-238, 225.

<sup>187</sup> Jacob Hiltzheimer, *Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer, of Philadelphia. 1765-1798*, edited and published by Jacob Parsons Cox, (Philadelphia, PA: Hansebooks, 2017). Dec. 28 1772, 25.

<sup>188</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 76.

<sup>189</sup> These regulations on taverngoing were enacted on July 11, 1693 when William Penn published "Laws and Orders for the Keepers and Frequenters of Ordinaries," shown in Soderlund's chapter "Tavern Regulations" in *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 206-207.

card-playing were forbidden, and the folks allowed in taverns had to be as one provision of the day provided “of an agreeable sort.”<sup>190</sup> Slaves, apprentices, and Indians were banned, and generally, the only company allowed in taverns tended to be working-class to elite land-owning white males who were seen as the dominant fulcrums of colonial society. Other eligible members of society who could have frequented taverns more readily but did not included “Awakened Protestants” and “respectable” women as the growing temperance movement against rum gained more popularity in the colonies.<sup>191</sup> This is again not to say they never entered such establishments as they often did on special occasions or when no other meeting site was available. As has been mentioned, these interest groups still understood the power a central public platform to share their messages held—these persons were just not the typical clientele of public houses.<sup>192</sup> The strict rules regarding what could be done in a tavern and who could dwell within meant that the main manner of entertainment in taverns was inclined to be the conversations of those within. The ethnically and culturally homogenous yet socioeconomically divergent company of males rich and poor drinking alongside one another was the hallmark of colonial tavern society, and the conversations between them were lively. Such an atmosphere of conversation among similar groups with varying interests meant that the space for political discourse was always prevalent in colonial taverns, and the natural flow of conversations often veered political. A fact most certainly in part aided by alcohol, specifically rum, serving as a social lubricant to remove previously held

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<sup>190</sup> Again, shown in 1693 in “Laws and Orders for the Keepers and Frequenters of Ordinaries,” in Soderlund, *the Founding of Pennsylvania*, 206-207.

<sup>191</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 74-75.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

inhibitions one might have felt in discussing politics with members of a separate economic class.

There were also numerous other regulations besides those mentioned above that dictated tavern-keeping in colonial America. Tavern-keepers also needed the vessels in which they served drinks to be branded with their official capacity and purpose; the locally regulated prices were to be prominently displayed in the entrance for any passerby to see, and citizens were encouraged to report if any publican's prices were cheating his patrons.<sup>193</sup> These prices were set by justices of the peace who updated these "reasonable rates" four times a year to ensure no confusion regarding pricing could occur.<sup>194</sup> The publicly dictated prices in cities such as Philadelphia would be proclaimed throughout the city by town criers and would be posted on the courthouse door for all to bear witness. An example of the strict regulations applied to taverns not just in price but operations comes from the colony of South Carolina, where tavern-keepers were permitted to sell liquor to sailors for only a single hour per day.<sup>195</sup> A rule set forth to ensure the crowd within was never of the rowdy sort and that the less desired members of civil society would not interfere with the valued conversations within.

An interesting, if perhaps tangential, side note on taverns and the effect stringent regulation had on them is how such regulations led to unique innovations from each establishment as a means of differentiating themselves and driving business. Whereas some taverns curated themselves to become hotbeds of political discourse, others veered to become what one might describe as more theatrical. Some taverns brought in

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<sup>193</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 78.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

waxworks or musicians to entice patrons, and some others began to concoct the very first of what today may be referred to as cocktails, almost all rum-based, as keepers hoped providing a specialized drink or atmosphere to increase sales might make up for lost revenues from fixed prices.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, rum also played an essential role in the subsequent development and export of the unique American cocktail culture that took the world by storm in the late nineteenth century and still exists strongly to this day. Alas, exploring the length and importance of rum on creating a nearly worldwide appreciation for cocktails is a narrative so lengthy and complex it warrants a dissertation entirely its own, and as such, nothing more of value can be added in the space afforded here.

Another topic that at first glance seems rather innocuous but upon further examination plays an integral role in the unique fraternal atmosphere of American taverns was the somewhat perplexing habit of toasting prevalent in colonial publican culture. While it is now understandable why rich and poor alike came together to drink in the same establishments, it is not immediately clear what would prompt conversations between classes to begin or even more so how these conversations might have begun. Although Peter Thompson describes colonial taverngoers as “rubbing shoulders with people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to a degree unknown in the nineteenth, let alone the twentieth, century,” this did not mean American colonials were an open-minded, tolerant, or socially liberal group.<sup>197</sup> In fact, it was quite the opposite as tavern patrons throughout the colonies, even in more liberal cities such as Philadelphia, were opinionated, prejudiced, and hypocritical by nature.<sup>198</sup> Wealthy men

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<sup>196</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 77-78.

<sup>197</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 77.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

did not enjoy drinking alongside poor, and ordinary workers surely did not enjoy the company of those who thought themselves “the better sort.”<sup>199</sup> Oftentimes a specific demographic of taverngoers, identified by “shared occupations, social standing, or interests,” attempted to claim social ownership of particular taverns, but for the anti-Habermasian reasons discussed above, encountered limited success. Therefore, to overcome the standoffish atmosphere a convergence of social and economic classes might create, it was common practice for colonial drinkers to try and create temporary bonds between interest groups by toasting, treating, and singing with one another.

Toasting was so pervasive in Colonial taverns as a way of creating fellowship and so unique to the Americas that a French observer once called the act “an absurd and truly barbarous practice.”<sup>200</sup> The Frenchman would continue to describe his confusion about toasting in stating, “the first time you drink and at the beginning of dinner, to call out successively to each individual, to let him know you drink his health...[is so overdrawn that] the actor in this ridiculous comedy is sometimes ready to die with thirst [by its conclusion.]”<sup>201</sup> However, the importance of creating such fellowship to allow the free flow of conversation between classes cannot be emphasized enough as it one of the defining hallmarks of American taverngoing that differentiates it from European taverns and coffeehouses. Nowhere else in the eighteenth century could such a diverse group of interests constantly be represented, and nowhere else could the disagreement of such

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<sup>199</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 77.

<sup>200</sup> François Jean Chastellux and George Washington, *Travels in North-America, in the Years 1780-81-82. Tr. from the French, by an English Gentleman, Who Resided in America at That Period. With Notes by the Translator. Also, a Biographical Sketch of the Author: Letters from Gen. Washington to the Marquis De Chastellux: and Notes and Corrections, by the American Editor* (New York, NY: White, Gallaher & White, 1827), 92-93.

<sup>201</sup> François Jean Chastellux and George Washington, *Travels in North-America*, 92-93.

groups be smoothed over and cordially discussed by way of a simple singular act which brought people together. The manner of toasts could vary significantly as throughout the colonies reasons for toasting ranged from praising his majesty's health, to the health and good fortune of those present, or as the Revolution drew near to freedom and victory for America. One newspaper from 1766 makes note of the toasting habits of the Sons of Liberty in a New Hampshire tavern as they began each evening with the call, "With Loyalty, Liberty, let us entwine; Our blood shall for both, flow as free as our wine. And a toast to the world. *Here's to those that dare be free.*"<sup>202</sup> Another toast prevalent in the colonies during the Revolution demonstrates the intense feelings of patriotism that swept America during the war. It went as follows,

'Tis Washington's health-- Fill a bumper all around, / For he is our glory and pride; / Our arms shall in battle with conquest be crown'd, / Whilst virtue and he's on our side. / 'Tis Washington's health -- Loud cannon should roar, / Add trumpets the truth should proclaim, / There cannot be found, search all the world o'er, / His equal in virtue and fame. / 'Tis Washington's health -- Our hero to bless,.../ O long may he live, our hearts to possess / And freedom still call him her own.<sup>203</sup>

Additionally, while colonists could use toasts to unite people or state the shared beliefs of a group at a tavern, they also served as a valuable weapon in the colonies of dissuading

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<sup>202</sup> "Poetry." *New-Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire), April 18, 1766: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A103709D225B248A8%40EANX-103CB6AA6BAEFF84%402366186-103CB6AAD3C9134E%403-103CB6ABA2525C6A%40Poetry>.

<sup>203</sup> "Poetry." *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), June 30, 1778: 216. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A109C466E6AFD7A58%40EANX-109C607DFB424DA8%402370642-109C607E15EEE228%401-109C607EB509E568%40Poetry>.

anyone unwanted from setting foot into a tavern. Toasts were a dangerous weapon because one could not drink while being toasted, and it was not uncommon for someone unwelcome in a tavern to face such a preponderance of toasts that any hope they had of drinking a dram was washed out by a never-ending wave of false calls of good cheer.

Still, the primary purpose of toasts in colonial America was to bring people together in a temporary raising of their glass and acknowledgment of one another as equals in that moment. Toasts generally consisted of one man in a tavern calling out to those around him, either to acknowledge a particular topic or person and all within raising their glasses in salute of the subject. As such, toasts were a welcome addition to a tavern for any barkeep as they necessitated everyone present having a drink in hand before an evening could proceed. An accurate reflection of a group entering a tavern and the toasting that would follow comes from a newspaper of the day wherein an unknown narrator describes his typical evening as “going to Taverns, calling for Bottles of Wine, frefh Lime Punch, [and] when fix-pence a piece were given for Limes, Pipes and Tobacco... [the group begins toasting one another beginning with] my Service to you Mr. Dick, your Health Mr. Peter, Your Toaft Mr. John, and your Lady, let her be I Pray you.”<sup>204</sup> In such a passage, one can surmise not only how often patrons had to toast one another given the listing of names at its conclusion, but also the prominent role rum, here described as “Lime Punch,” had in facilitating a successful evening at the taverns. While

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<sup>204</sup> "By Inserting the Inclosed, You Will Very Much Oblige Your Humble Servant." *American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), August 10, 1738: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10380B67EBBF3BE8%40EANX-1062A2BD7B60E844%402356073-1062A2BD96936505%401-1062A2BDE08D9959%40By%2BInserting%2Bthe%2BInclosed%252C%2BYou%2BWill%2BVery%2BMuch%2BOblige%2BYour%2BHumble%2BServant>.

conversations on politics and societal problems occurred in other settings in other countries, the American tavern was unique because the varying interest groups represented felt bonds to one another thanks to toasts. Therefore, patrons managed to engage with different-minded individuals in the public space in a unique, distinctly American way. Colonial Americans saw in the tavern an instrument for a wide variety of uses beyond drinking and merrymaking and instead understood the tavern as a means of furthering their agendas onto those different from themselves. Americans were encouraged to view the tavern as such by the belief that their drinking rituals could draw men from many different backgrounds “into relationships that were at least temporarily harmonious,” and from these, a political dialogue or discourse could then spring.<sup>205</sup> Without toasting, high- and low-class Americans would have no reason nor no means to engage with one another, even if they occupied the same space, nor a means of establishing a central belief or thought within a tavern to be agreed upon or argued over. Therefore, toasting must be seen as a quintessential part of the colonial tavern experience and a vital part of its ability to impact the American Revolution by making possible the creation of the politically engaged atmosphere necessary for civil dissonance to take hold.

Simply told, taverns were an establishment where at first glance there was no telling who one may be seated next to nor what ideas that person may hold, but by night’s end, all would be discussed. Anglicans drank with Congregationalists, lawyers with craftsmen, and merchants with artisans. Once again, perhaps the only noticeable absence from influential colonial society were the women and children of the era, and even they at times entered the fray. The vast majority of pre-Revolutionary taverns were the

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<sup>205</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 79.

previously private residences of those who owned them, simple one to three-story dwellings, and as noted, most often consisted of just a single room. As such, to say that privacy was at a minimum is an understatement. Instead, within a colonial tavern, the business of one was the business of all who were present.<sup>206</sup> While much has now been written on how such intimacy built the fraternal bonds of taverngoers and the rational-critical discourse within, it would be naive to say that all taverns were such brotherly places or that all conversations were so genteel.

Taverns could often be places of low-grade conflict, the place colonists went to trade verbal blows, and sometimes even physical, with those they disagreed. Rather than bringing colonists together in a uniformity of opinions, the diverse interests represented within taverns often meant that verbal and physical sparring was a prerequisite as groups goaded and taunted one another.<sup>207</sup> However, in such a setting where uniformity may be lost, another valuable asset is gained as these taverns grew to be the training ground for many a revolutionary seeking to learn the ways of public debate and in need of the public recognition to become political leaders. One such leader who saw in taverns the valuable tool of public relevance was a young lawyer and future president, John Adams, who came to be a part of many a political debate over drams of rum in the Boston tavern scene from the mid-1760s onwards. Adams once wrote recalling the atmosphere of such taverns, “you will find the [tavern] full of People, drinking Drams, Phlip, Toddy, Carousing, swearing, but especially, plotting,” if a leader wished to be successful in colonial America, Adams continues, “[One must] mix with the crowd in a tavern...and grow

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<sup>206</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 86.

<sup>207</sup> Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution*, 131.

popular by your agreeable assistance in the tittle-tattle of the hour.”<sup>208</sup> By interspersing with the various interest groups of a tavern and playing a ready role in the inherent debates presented, Adams and other prominent revolutionaries understood that they could make a name for themselves and achieve a route to public favor. After all, political power and influence in the newfangled and popular idea of democracy was not something automatically granted to someone with high standing, an education, or even prominent connections. Instead, politicians earn political power by way of public support and recognition, and the fastest way to such support was by entering the “rummy world of the tavern” to showcase your political chops for all to see.<sup>209</sup> The frequency of New Englanders by and large to enter the tavern to further political debates and ambitions was so pervasive that as a Hessian mercenary, Baron Friedrich Adolph von Riedesel, who had served in the colonies during the Seven Years War and again during the Revolution, would note: “The New Englanders all want to be politicians, and therefore, love the tavern and the grog-bowl, over which they do their business, and drink from morning till night. They are all extremely curious, credulous, and madly in love with freedom.”<sup>210</sup> Taverns, politics, rum, and the concept of American liberty were so intertwined that there was no separating them for colonials and modern historians alike. The political maelstroms colonial taverns presented and the dominant social standing of the tavern in

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<sup>208</sup> Draft of a Letter from John Adams to the *Boston Gazette*, May 1761, in *Founders Online*, National Archives, *Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, by his Grandson Charles Francis Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856). 10 volumes. Vol. 2, 51.

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-01-02-0006-0005-0001>

<sup>209</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 87.

<sup>210</sup> Edward J Lowell, *The Hessians and the Other German Auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1884), 189.

colonial life meant that American independence and rum were forever linked, a fact which America's founding fathers would soon seek to forget.

The connection between rum and freedom was an easy one for colonists to make. Rum had been the economic driver of colonies' early development, and it was the vessel upon which political debates sailed. Early freedom in the Americas had meant being able to use the fruit of one's labor to purchase a New World product, consume it in a communal public space, and hash out the day's topics with others as equals. Rum was a lightning rod around which men of all classes gathered and whose repression could be likened to a repressing of liberty itself. As such, rum and taverngoing became the stars of the first American propaganda campaigns as the ideal tool to call citizens to arms and defend their freedoms. Prominent revolutionaries like Samuel Adams and James Otis would begin holding orations at taverns such as the Green Dragon in Boston, wherein they outlined the crimes of the Crown against the American populace and this practice of orators decrying the King in taverns became typical throughout the colonies.<sup>211</sup> Samuel Adams was so noted in his habit of speaking at taverns that Tory detractors claimed he and his following depended on "barrels of rum to give them courage," and as historian A.J. Langguth notes, he soon acquired the nickname "Sam the Publican" for his constant presence in the establishments.<sup>212</sup> Other key figures like John Hancock used his deep pockets and connections as a shipping magnet to begin providing free rum to any attendees of demonstrations and rallies against Great Britain in an effort to spur

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<sup>211</sup> A. J. Langguth, *Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 78.

<sup>212</sup> Langguth, *Patriots*, 56-57.

attendance.<sup>213</sup> The practice of doling out rum for political gain was a carryover from electoral campaigns of the day as the voting populace thought those who did not provide free rum were stingy and untrustworthy for public office.<sup>214</sup> Rum was such an integral symbol to American political success that George Washington himself had failed in his first electoral campaigns for failing to provide adequate drink at the polls, a lesson he clearly took to heart as in his subsequent successful attempt for office, he brought a pint and a half of rum for each of his 361 supporters at the polls.<sup>215</sup> Moreover, while much has been written on the Sons of Liberty decision to boycott tea as an example of the luxuries colonists were willing to forgo in the name of independence, less has been said that the same agreement called for patriots to put aside rum as well.<sup>216</sup> In summation, rum and the tavern were the ultimate symbols of freedom and liberty to colonial Americans, and America's founders used this to their advantage in garnering public support wherever they could. There was no better place to discuss politics, nor no better drink to serve when the topic was at hand than a tavern and some rum, and so the two became the ultimate symbols for the American Revolution.

Rum as a political tool, however, had its drawbacks. Although many, particularly white men, loved rum and its role in colonial society, this was not all-encompassing, nor was such an affection for alcoholic beverages among leading luminaries sustainable. Rum and alcohol consumption, in general, had to be reined in at some point, and the place of a spirit such as rum occupying a lofty position in society re-examined. Furthermore, what

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<sup>213</sup> Langguth, *Patriots*, 67.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

America's founding fathers realized rather quickly upon doing so, was that although rum was great at motivating revolution and political discourse in the lead up to America's war for independence, the spirit also had many negative connections that were not so favorable for the nation moving forward. As a direct result of these unsavory connections, rum would go from being the spirit of revolution in the buildup to 1776 to largely forgotten by just 1800. What were these connections that caused such a precipitous downfall, however, and why was America so fast in turning its back on its favored spirit? For that, one must now turn to the final volume of this thesis focusing on the broader social drawbacks of rum and the more extensive timeline of why the spirit that caused a revolution disappeared.

## Chapter Three

### *Demon Rum and Sainly Folk: The Fall of Rum*

“Hail, Mighty Rum! and by this general name  
I call each species, whiskey, gin, or brandy,  
And so I choose a name that’s short and handy:  
For, reader, know it takes a deal of time to make a crooked word lie smooth in rhyme.  
Hail, mighty Rum! what can thy power withstand?  
E’en lordly reason flies thy dreadful face,  
And health and joy, and all the lovely band  
Of social virtues, shun thy dwelling place”

-Samuel J. Smith. “Eulogium on Rum”

Rum was the dominant spirit of the American Revolution. No spirit, and arguably no commodity, had a greater impact on American colonials' economic and social motivations to seek independence, and so rum occupied a revered place in colonial society. Nevertheless, this raises the obvious question of why it is that rum no longer occupies such a place and why was it forgotten by much of the American populace as a defiant tool of rebellion? To understand rum's place and importance in the American Revolution, one must also understand rum's subsequent removal from American society and what necessitated that downfall. While much of the discussion surrounding rum so far has been on the more positive aspects of the spirit, it now becomes imperative to understand the negative connotations of rum and the consequences associating with those connotations could have on a nascent democracy. Rum as a spirit and a symbol of a nation, while useful in inciting rebellion, was inherently unsuitable to serve as a reflection of a civil democratic society. Its links to slavery, the old world, and the overconsumption of alcohol in America made it easy cannon fodder for those wishing to limit the spirit. Rum did not just disappear overnight, however, nor was it any one factor that forced rum's removal from American society. Instead, it was the convergence of three larger subfactors: a change in economic value, an increase in anti-rum temperance causes, and the irredeemable links to slavery that dug rum's grave. By exploring these three factors, one can understand not only why rum became the forgotten spirit of the American Revolution but also how a revolution centered around liberty with rum as its rallying cry was not the harmonious, high-minded, or ideologically driven event it is perceived to be in the hallowed retellings of America's founding.

The first factor that led to rum losing its economic, and subsequently its social, importance in the new United States was undoubtedly the change in tastes and profitability brought about by the Revolution itself. The American revolutionaries, although earnest in their attempts to protect New England Rum, had not been very kind to said rum trade as seven long years of war choked off the vital trade routes needed to keep rum flowing. The lack of an adequate Continental Navy beyond the daring adventures of John Paul Jones had meant there was little importation of the needed molasses for producing rum nor transporting of the finished product.<sup>217</sup> Furthermore, many of the prior sources of molasses were no longer available to American traders. British plantations were beholden to the Navigation Acts that Americans had just fought to free themselves from, and the lull in American trading on French islands meant that those islands had finally begun to develop distillation processes of their own.<sup>218</sup> Without the crucial fuel that was French molasses, American rum production would sputter to a mere drop of its pre-war levels. Moreover, while the production and consumption of rum had once served as a marker of colonists asserting their independence from Great Britain, after the American Revolution this all changed.

Rum inherently was a spirit that could not be fully American. Sugar cane was not cultivated in the new republic, and any molasses needed for distillation would have to be imported from faraway lands still united with the Old World. Much of what had spurred the American Revolution was the favoritism displayed towards Caribbean holdings over the North American Colonies by Great Britain, and as such, those holdings had felt no

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<sup>217</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 538.

<sup>218</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 133.

need to join in America's cause for independence. Without those islands in the fold, America could have no native production of its own, and any distillation of rum would necessitate a continued connection to the very entities from which America had fought to separate. Whereas rum had once been prized for its Caribbean origins and been consumed as a sign of New World success, it was now tainted by such affiliations to the sugar islands. As the thinking went, why would Americans spend their hard-earned money to enrich the pockets of a few British planters who had not sided with them in the war? Intrepid businessmen across America capitalized on this negative link and began to market new homegrown products to meet the new anti-rum stance and take rum's place. Boston Brewer Samuel Adams went so far as to start an ad campaign, noting, "It is to be hoped, that the Gentlemen of the Town will endeavor to bring our own October Beer into Fashion again, by that most prevailing Motive, Example, so that we may no longer be beholden to foreigners for A Credible Liquor, which may be as successfully manufactured in this Country."<sup>219</sup> Further exacerbating the issue for rum distillers, the cost of molasses only continued to increase over the latter half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the toll of two hundred years of sugar cultivation wore out the soils of the Caribbean islands and productivity dropped precipitously. Whereas British West Indian reexports of sugar had averaged around 100,000 tons in 1802, by 1827, they had fallen to just 27,000 tons, with French sugar islands seeing a similar drop in production.<sup>220</sup> Such a decrease in scale meant that not only did rum suffer from the

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<sup>219</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 135.

<sup>220</sup> Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 109.

negative publicity of being associated as an old-world product, but the cost of producing and therefore consuming it also increased, further killing demand.

The combined effect of fresh competition and more expensive molasses ensured that the quantity of rum consumed in America fell by breathtaking margins. A population which in 1770 had consumed over 8,000,000 gallons of rum for just 2.1 million colonists would by 1790 drink only 7 million gallons despite the population nearly doubling in that time to 3.9 million people.<sup>221</sup> The effect was immediate as by 1800, America produced just 45% of the rum it had a decade prior, and most telling by 1888, the bustling rum metropolis of Boston, which once housed nearly fifty distilleries in its greater vicinity, now housed just three.<sup>222</sup> Naturally, a new spirit had to fill rum's place as the colonial thirst for spirits had still not fully abated, and so it was only a matter of time before whiskey would rise to its present place as the defining spirit of America. Whiskey could be homegrown, its production was a sign of growing prosperity and an excess of previously invaluable grains, and most importantly, it carried with it none of the negative connotations to slave labor or temperance movements that plagued rum. Those latter two components mentioned briefly previously are perhaps the most significant reasons for rum's fall from grace as they only exacerbated rum's economic decline while simultaneously stirring up new reasons for Americans to abandon the spirit.

Rum, after all, did not just grow on its own: slavery was always integral to the rum trade. Whether in the production of the raw sugar harvested on the back of slave

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<sup>221</sup> Clay Risen, "How America Learned to Love Whiskey," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, December 6, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/12/how-america-learned-to-love-whiskey/282110/>.

<sup>222</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 136.

labor to the influx of experienced distillers in former indentured servants displaced by the increased slave trade, slavery and rum always intermixed. Of the eleven million Africans stolen from their homes and forced onto the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade, sugar, and by extension rum, consumed by far the most, with over six million Africans enslaved in support of the industry.<sup>223</sup> Rum was so integral to the slave trade—be it in payment for slaves, payment for raw materials used to purchase slaves, or drink to celebrate the closing of a transaction for slaves—the two could never be separated.<sup>224</sup> Rum and slavery were so synonymous that whenever a successful cane harvest and sugar season came to an end, planters and overseers rewarded slaves for their hours of backbreaking, horrific, whip-induced labor with token gifts of sugar, sometimes food, and above all else, rum.<sup>225</sup> As one plantation owner noted after a successful harvest, he “served the Negroes 15 quarts of rum out of the butt a filling in the curing house, and 2 large bottoms of sugar to make them merry, now crop over.”<sup>226</sup> Slaves so grew to expect rum as the only appreciation for their stolen labor that anytime planters withheld the rum; there was usually a corresponding mutiny among the slaves against their oppressive masters.<sup>227</sup> Although much has been written on the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade, it is still challenging to represent the barbaric nature of the practice accurately. Stories abound of the cruel punishments, horrific conditions, and pure evil that encompassed the trade, and yet it still difficult for modern readers to grasp entirely. The mistreatment of

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<sup>223</sup> Elizabeth Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History* (New York, NY: Abrams Press, 2011), 178.

<sup>224</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 496.

<sup>225</sup> Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*, 219.

<sup>226</sup> Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica 1750-86* (Bridgetown, Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 1999), 47.

<sup>227</sup> Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*, 220.

human beings as objects was so overwhelming that even in the era of the Revolution, contemporaneous historians and other observers were writing about the immorality of the slave trade. A particularly gruesome story from a Dutch captain named J.G. Stedman in his account of his time on the island of Surinam depicts the brutal murder of an innocent child and the lashing of his mother for her defiance. Stedman writes,

A Mrs. S—lk—r [the lady of the plantation] going to her estate in a tent barge, a negro woman, with her fucking infant, happened to be passengers. The child crying, from pain perhaps...could not be hushed; Mrs. S—lk—r offended with the cries of this innocent little creature, ordered the mother to bring it aft, and deliver it into her hands; then, in the presence of the distracted parent, she immediately thrust it out one of the tilt-windows, where she held it under water until it was drowned, and then let go. The fond mother, in a state of desperation, instantly leapt overboard into the stream where floated her beloved offspring, in conjunction with which she wished to finish her miserable existence. In this, however, she was prevented by the exertions of the negroes who rowed the boat, and was punished by her mistress with three or four hundred lashes...<sup>228</sup>

Stedman's horrific story is just one of many recorded and countless unrecorded instances that underscores the vile nature of slavery and demonstrates why America's founders did not want the symbol of the nation to be connected to slavery—even if the vast majority of them were slave owners themselves. The connection between rum and slavery was something the founding fathers of America knew. While abolition was undoubtedly not the mass movement it would be a century later, America's founders understood the hypocritical nature of a nation founded on liberty having its national spirit be inextricably linked to slavery. Therefore, although rum had been a helpful tool in uniting Americans to join in the Revolution, once it was successful, there was no need to associate on a

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<sup>228</sup> John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of a five years' expedition; against the revolted negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the wild coast of South America; from the year 1772, to 1777: ... By Captn. J. G. Stedman. illustrated with 80 elegant engravings, ...* (Vol. Volume 1. London, 1796.), 330.

national scale with something that blatantly contradicted the values America had been founded upon. In addition, a wave of slave revolts across the Caribbean in the later years of the eighteenth century and the abolition movements in the early nineteenth century not only put the connection between rum and slavery in sharp relief but also heightened the financial costs of producing rum as sugar productivity fell and prices raised quickly.<sup>229</sup> The most influential of these uprisings, the 1791 slave revolution on French St. Dominique in present-day Haiti, was arguably the most decisive factor in the death of the American rum industry.

As the first post-colonial black republic, Haiti's new government had been founded in 1804 on ideals of liberty, self-determination, and equality among men that were hallmarks of the American experiment. However, this young nation was abandoned by their new world brethren to the North not even 30 years after their own revolution, in a signifier that U.S. leaders did not see these ideals as being available to all men. A conflict of morals that draws bare the flawed nature of American morals and foreign policy that still haunts both nations to this day. In the United States, wealthy white males felt a distinct uneasiness about the world's second republic. Haiti, after all, was a nation founded upon the violent uprising and subsequent emancipation of slaves under white rule. These men feared, perhaps reasonably, that the success of such a revolution and America's support would lead to racial instability in their lands as enslaved black Americans saw in the success of Haiti a chance for their own liberation. As such, white plantation owners, primarily Southern, immediately sought to restrict all trade and contact with the new Haitian Republic. While the United States had initially been in

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<sup>229</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 87-88.

support of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 under the Federalist, and therefore foreign-oriented Washington and Adam's administrations, this would no longer be the case by the time of Haitian independence in 1804. Whereas federalist figures such as Alexander Hamilton had gone so far as to help craft the Haitian constitution under the belief that strengthening economic and diplomatic ties would help both republics survive in a world full of former colonial enemies, the incumbent Jefferson wanted nothing of the sort.<sup>230</sup>

Upon assuming the Presidency, Thomas Jefferson had immediately recalled the consular-general to Haiti, Edward Stevens, a man whose position as consul "suggested a diplomat attached to a country not a colony and a reflection of the Adams administration's view of the Haitian situation," and set about severing all economic and diplomatic ties to the island.<sup>231</sup> The culmination of these efforts and other factors was the Embargo Act of 1807, in which Jefferson cut off all foreign trade by the U.S. to devastating effect for both nascent Haiti and the long-standing New England rum trade. Haiti would go from being the wealthiest island in the Caribbean to the poorest nation in the western world by modern standards as foreign powers unwilling to trade with the Caribbean nation shuttered the central focus of its economy. New England distillers, meanwhile, would see the price of the molasses needed for distillation skyrocket further, which, combined with falling demand from the previously mentioned factors, effectively killed the trade.

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<sup>230</sup> James Oliver Horton, "Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation," *New-York Journal of American History*. Volume 3, (2003): pp. 16–24, 23.

<sup>231</sup> Tim Matthewson, *A Proslavery Foreign Policy Haitian-American Relations during the Early Republic* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 100.

The reason Haiti and the embargo of trade with the island was such a focal point in the death of American rum was, as a keen reader may recall, French molasses constituted the vast majority of the commodity imported into the American Colonies. As mentioned, by 1770, 86.7% of all molasses imported in the American colonies hailed from French islands.<sup>232</sup> However, the unknown factor pertinent here in relating to that total is how overwhelming a role Haiti played in importing of such a figure. Of the 5,777,747 gallons of molasses imported from the French West Indies, 4,357,000 gallons came from Haiti alone.<sup>233</sup> It was, by and large, the most influential producer of molasses to the United States, and without the cheap, overwhelming flow of Haitian molasses, the rum trade as structured in North America could not survive. The rum industry as it existed before 1800 would never recover, and the ability to produce rum as a native spirit and at such a scale as to be a symbol of America would never again be possible.

The time for rum as the spirit of America had drawn to a close, betrayed by the very leaders of the Revolution which had been fought to protect it. But why did America's founders abandon rum in favor of defending the interests of slaveholders, and what does this say about the American foundation at large? By turning off the Haitian faucet of molasses, Jefferson signified that the rum trade, which America had just arguably waged a war over, was no longer of the hegemonial importance it had been just thirty years prior. Such a rapid about-face from the founders of America demonstrates that perhaps they never even held the spirit in such high regard in the first place—it was just a means to an end of obtaining liberty. However, this is not the case as America's

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<sup>232</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 355.

<sup>233</sup> Paul M. Bondonio, "l'Industrie sucrière française au dix-huitième siècle," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* 19, no. 3 (1931): pp. 316-346, 357.

founders *did* value rum that highly at the time of rebellion; the fact of the matter is that by the time of the Haitian Revolution, the economics of slavery had grown and now weighed even more consequentially on the American psyche than rum. The clear correlation and causation of the economic impact of Jefferson's political action is a stain upon the founding of the United States and the early actions of the American Republic that cannot be ignored when discussing the motivations of America's founders.

While it is easy for many to espouse a patriotic narrative of a few brave souls standing up to fight for the grand ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the true story relates to a far more dishonorable desire to protect one's pocketbook—liberty just happened to be an easy cover. Why else would the United States fight a war over a rum only to abandon such a vital and politically similar trading partner as Haiti if economics and the greater force of slavery were not in effect? America had been founded on economic action in defense of rum and would continue to operate in the defense of economics, regardless of the commodity (here being slaves), morals and values be damned. The United States would fail to recognize Haiti as a country or trading partner until 1862, nearly 40 years after France (from whom Haiti had waged a war of independence), and even then, U.S. recognition was only because of the broader emancipatory movement spearheaded by President Lincoln at the time.<sup>234</sup> All told, rum and its relation to Haiti and the United States is critical in understanding the motivations of why America was founded. Even more so, however, the later willingness to abandon

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<sup>234</sup> Rocio Cara Labrador, "Haiti's Troubled Path to Development," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, March 12, 2018), <https://www.cfr.org/background/haitis-troubled-path-development>.

rum and a vulnerable new Caribbean republic in favor of greener fiscal pastures reveals the true foundations of the American Revolution: profit, not democracy.

Although the economic downturn of rum combined with the horrific links to slavery was enough to curtail the drinking habits of newly independent Americans, these were still not the sole cause of rum's demise. The temperance movement that has been mentioned in passing repeatedly also played a central role in rum's removal from American society as its proponents targeted rum above all else. The singling out of rum was for a variety of reasons: it was the most consumed spirit, the one most associated with acts of debauchery and violence (especially among Native American populaces), and of course, it was easy to rhyme with—a fact that sounds trivial but proved vital for public relations campaigns where slogans and catchphrases aimed to remind people of the evils of alcohol.

The growth of a temperance movement within the United States was not an altogether unexpected one. Americans liked to drink, and they liked to drink a lot. A quantitative study on the drinking habits of colonial Americans by historian William Rorabaugh found that between 1780-1800 the American consumption of distilled spirits per capita stood at approximately 3.8 gallons per year, well above the 1.2 gallons per capita consumed in Great Britain in the same era.<sup>235</sup> Although the vast majority of this drinking came in the form of daily drams and drinks over events, a significant chunk also came in communal binge drinking sessions among working-class men.<sup>236</sup> The health and public safety concerns associated with large groups of working-age men drinking to

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<sup>235</sup> William J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: an American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1981), 238.

<sup>236</sup> Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, 249.

excess are obvious, and it was not uncommon for rowdy nights at the tavern to end in a hefty amount of violence or public damage. Moreover, while the economic system of paying workers in rum and hard spirits had been beneficial for early entrepreneurs as a way of cutting costs, such payment was not as kindly received by the wives and children of laborers who spent little time in taverns or had little use for such massive quantities of rum. While rum could be used as a currency in colonial America, with Continental Army forces on more than one occasion accepting it in place of payment from Congress, that does not mean it still held the same value as actual hard currency itself.<sup>237</sup> A few shillings went much further for general goods and services than a pint of rum, and many women grew wearisome of the hold rum had on the men in their homes as the eighteenth century drew to a close.

Joining in the dissatisfaction of some women about rum's grip on society were many of the ministers and clergymen who had seen their previously pre-eminent place in American social hierarchy fall as America moved past its puritan roots. Whereas churches and their leaders had once dominated all aspects of life in early founding, the tavern had supplanted that position as the central hub of the public sphere, and many came to blame rum for causing this. Together, these two powerful forces in American society could unite to vilify rum, and on the back of one of the most persistent campaigns in American history, convince America to leave the spirit in the past. As historian Wayne Curtis again writes,

Demon Rum helped pull together a decentralized movement that was often at cross-purposes. Goals varied: some called for a complete abstention from drink, others just for moderation. Some wanted all forms of alcohol driven from the country...But they all could share a loathing for the demon

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<sup>237</sup> McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution*, 537.

itself. Rum was a uniter, not a divider...and it had come full circle. In colonial times, rum was a symbol of freedom and independence—not only from Great Britain, but also from the dour Puritan elites. Now rum stood in the way of true freedom.<sup>238</sup>

Again, one reason such a campaign could become so widespread and so successful was that rum was an easy target. Numerous stories existed of “demon rum” and the troubles it wrought on those who drank it. The temperance seekers seized upon this narrative and, in a flurry of written documents, pamphlets, and speeches, buried colonial society in an onslaught of information disparaging the essence of America’s favored spirit.

A result of the movement was that by 1851, the American Tract Society, the chief temperance group, reported the distribution of nearly five million temperance pamphlets.<sup>239</sup> Additionally, thirteen of these pamphlets, or tracts, had issued over 100,000 copies, a figure on par with Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, which had seen 500,000 copies distributed before and during the Revolutionary War.<sup>240</sup> Such widespread dissemination of temperance literature was a consequence of the invention and perfection of cheap printing and an efficient distribution system which had become commonplace in the United States by 1800, partly thanks to Benjamin Franklin’s favored child, the U.S. postal system. As an example, one wealthy New Yorker, a Stephen Van Rensselaer, “paid to have a copy of one tract delivered to every post office in the country,” and another retired Albany merchant Edward Delavan, “circulated a temperance broadside to every household in the state of New York.”<sup>241</sup> The onslaught was so overwhelming that between 1829-1834, the New York State Temperance Society alone would circulate

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<sup>238</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 147.

<sup>239</sup> Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, 196.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

4,551,930 copies of anti-rum publications.<sup>242</sup> Nearly every state had such a society, each publishing on a similar scale relative to population size, and so anti-rum literature was everywhere.

These pamphlets varied in nature from stories of how rum ruined lives to simple jingles meant to burrow into one's head and continually remind them of rum's dangers.

One anti-rum tract focused on child-raising published by a preacher named William Hines that meant to exemplify the terrifying nature of rum raised the point: "If you must sometimes scare [children] in the room of telling them that bears will catch them, that hobgoblins or ghosts will catch them, tell them instead that *Rum* will catch them."<sup>243</sup>

Another pamphlet describing the dogged determination of the temperance movement to drive rum from the land read simply, "Our temperance efforts we must never cease, Till from Rum's curse we do our land release."<sup>244</sup> Rum was the vile spirit, the one which above all else had to expunged from the land. Rum was a shorthand way of referring to any spirit or problem in society for the temperance cause, and so was the subject of a laser-like focus against it. The temperance poem which prefaces this chapter references how rum came to be synonymous with all liquors and evils within the United States, the Caesar of alcohols, and one whose existence drove all godly virtues from the land.

Another much later temperance poem decrying rum as the "king" of evil alcohol from the Women Christian Temperance Movement went, "Hear the happy voices ringing, / as "King Rum" is downward hurled, / Shouting vict'ry and hosanna, / In their march to save

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<sup>242</sup> Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*, 196.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

the world.”<sup>245</sup> Further hurting rum’s cause was the connection the spirit had with the massacre of the native populace of the Americas and the belief that only an evil spirit could have resulted in such suffering. Native populaces had been decimated by a seeming genetic predilection for alcoholic behaviors that American colonists had extensively exploited to the point Native leaders sought to ban the trade of rum with their peoples. As one Shawnee chieftain named Benewisco wrote in 1768, “Rum is the thing that makes us Indians poor & foolish,” while another chief named Little Turtle went so far as to petition John Adams to ban the sale of rum to native tribes because, as Adams writes, “He said, I had lost three thousand of my Indian children in his nation in one year to it.”<sup>246, 247</sup> The devious association between rum and native death was such that the prefacing temperance poem mentioned earlier also draws note to it, stating,

When our bold fathers crossed the Atlantic wave, / And here arrived a  
weak, defenceless band, / Pray what became of all the tribes so brave, /  
The savage owners of this happy land? / Were they sent headlong to the  
realms below / By doom of battle? Friend, I answer no. / Our fathers were  
too wise to think of war...But Rum, assisted by his son, Disease, /  
Performed the business with surprising ease.<sup>248</sup>

The combined effect of the temperance movement’s campaigns, the negative connections to slavery and Native deaths, and the decrease in the economic viability of the rum trade all became too much to bear for rum to remain America’s spirit.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, rum had been relegated to a second-class liquor, drunk only by the lowest members of society. Politicians and historians of the era

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<sup>245</sup> Madelon Powers, *Faces along the Bar Lore and Order in the Workingman’s Saloon, 1870-1920* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 84.

<sup>246</sup> Curtis, *And a Bottle of Rum*, 75.

<sup>247</sup> John Adams, “Letter to Benjamin Rush,” August 28, 1811, in the *Adams Papers* (Washington, DC: Founders Online, n.d.), pp. 1-1, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5678>.

<sup>248</sup> Smith Samuel J. 1771, “Eulogium on Rum’ ,” in *Miscellaneous Writings of the Late Samuel J.. Smith of Burlington, N.j* (New York, NY: Nabu Press, 2010), 81-82.

minimized its impact and role in creating the American Revolution to avoid temperance seekers' wrath, and the republic of rum that had been America at founding was no more. In summation, rum's erasure from the public consciousness and the annals of America's foundation was not only a deliberate action with economically and socially motivated reasoning, but it was also an ideological erasure desired by America's founders. The decision to abandon rum as America's spirit was a way of rationalizing the American Revolution for America's early leaders and a tool for portraying the early republic as a moral, religious, and sober entity which it most certainly was not. The false recreation of history desired by the early American republic in its erasure of rum was meant to strengthen the image of America moving forward; however, when viewed in retrospect, it only highlights the all-too-common American tradition of erasing and moving past complex issues rather than fixing the problem at hand.

Conclusion: *The Rum Republic*

Although it may be tempting to write off a study of the impact an alcoholic spirit had on the formation of the American Revolution as narrow-minded or overly jaunty in nature, such a study is well-warranted when discussing the broader historiography of the American Revolution. While obviously no single commodity or event can capture the entirety of why the American colonists sought independence, rum manages to be an excellent distilling point of the larger economic and social trends of the era that necessitated a desire for rebellion. By discussing rum's role in the American Revolution and its later dismissal by the new American nation, a historian may apply the social and structuralist forms of historiography made popular by the *Annales* School that developed in the first half of the twentieth century and examine the middle and short durations of history that defined the era. The *Annalistes* believed that studying economic and social structures could provide insight into a more overarching *mentalité* that took hold in a specific historic epoch.<sup>249</sup> And indeed, a study of rum in the colonial period affords similar access to the worldviews that took hold in early America. Rum was both the lynchpin of longer-term economic and social structures: indeed, it was defining commodity of America's early history, and as such, provides a means of gaining insight into the motivations of the short-term politics that led America to break away. Rum reveals not only why America's founders went to war but that perhaps the narrative and historiography of American independence forgets much of the darker aspects of America's foundation. Although it was rum that made Americans seek liberty, the base desire to protect financial interests that made rum the driver of independence also made

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<sup>249</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 87.

Americans forget the values of liberty and equality that they professed. Rum reveals a startling truth about America and yet one that every American knows and often states with pride: America is above all else a capitalist nation. America was founded on the economic incentive of a few hot-headed rum enthusiasts who sought to protect their bottom dollar and their rummy way of life. Americans were not loyal to any one commodity or cause in particular; all that mattered was the feeling of financial and personal freedom rum provided, and it was for this that Americans fought. By understanding the commodity that drove Americans to rebel and the many positives and negatives associated with rum, one can understand the intrinsic positives and negatives that form the basis of the American nation.

For better or worse, rum was the spirit of the Revolution and the troubled nation it helped birth. Rum was America's first favored spirit, and although many have forgotten the place of rum in creating, the vestiges of the product are everywhere. Americans still value financial and personal freedom above all else. Americans are still willing to erase the uglier aspects of their society in defense of finances, and America has still not fully detangled itself from the specter of slavery that defined rum and the early nation. The complicated relationship between America, race, and its own history is evident in how rum created the United States and even more so in how America washed away its history. It is for this reason that historians must remember rum and the colossal impact a single spirit had on shaping the world.

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