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Tea Trade, Consumption, and the Republican Paradox in Prerevolutionary Philadelphia

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*Tea Trade, Consumption, and the
Republican Paradox in
Prerevolutionary Philadelphia*

ON JANUARY 2, 1774, a usually cool and controlled William Smith wrote heatedly to his trade partners in New York, “Vanderbelt has sent a parcell of his Trash to Town [per] White & Son wh [which] they confess is not good and are hurting us all by offering to fall the price. Mercer & Ramsay & myself have 4 Hhds [Hogsheads] I suppose of the same which am just told are come down . . . from New York.” He continued indignantly, “If Vanderbelt has Realy been guilty of Mixing his Tea & cannot be made to pay all damages for his Robbing the public & breaking all Mercantile faith, I think we have very little security for the Honor which is always suppos’d to subsist amongst Merchants had the thing happened here & been proved the Offender wd be consider’d in a most dispicable light.”¹

Smith’s indignity over a merchant’s lost honor had precedence. In the

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¹ William Smith to Samuel Burling and Joseph and Robert Totten, Jan. 2, 1774, William Smith Letterbook, 1771–1775, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also William Smith to Mercer and Ramsay, Jan. 2, 1774, in *ibid.*

early modern world, one's reputation as an honest trader directly influenced a merchant's ability to gain and sustain credit, the lifeblood of all business. If a merchant earned a reputation for providing shoddy goods or the wrong goods in an untimely manner, his business correspondents would learn quickly about his behavior, and few people would continue to order from him. A bad reputation ultimately weakened the merchant's ability to get long-term credit from London agents and other suppliers and isolated him from his colleagues and friends.² William Smith's lament fits nicely into this milieu of honor. He worried that John Vanderbilt's unscrupulous practice of "mixing tea" (often with twigs, weeds, or even dirt) was not only "Robbing the public" and "breaking all Mercantile faith," but might reflect badly on his own reputation as a merchant. Smith's mortification becomes more troubling, however, when we realize that he refers to smuggled tea (his own), which he had ordered the month before from this nefarious contact in New York. In all, he seemed less worried about the quality of the tea than the lost "profit by [Vanderbilt's] unfair Dealing."³ How do we then read this incident? Was it simply a question of "honor among thieves," or did Smith, like some others, consider his smuggling a virtuous and patriotic act that defied the detested parliamentary duties on tea? How *did* eighteenth-century Americans define and grapple with the moral and political dimensions of the prerevolutionary marketplace?

Actually, merchants and their customers in the mid-Atlantic region had a very ambivalent relationship with tea as a consumer product and as a political symbol. Many considered tea a sign of British oppression and unfair taxation from the post-Seven Years' War period, when Parliament attempted to impose a series of tax measures to raise revenue for imperial salaries in the colonies. Americans developed an entire moral lexicon condemning the rituals of buying and drinking tea. Because this rhetoric

² See, for example, correspondence from John Reynell to Elias Bland, in John Reynell Letterbook, 1734–1774, Coates and Reynell Papers, 1702–1843, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The eighteenth century abounded with advice books for merchants and young traders that invariably recommended that a merchant closely guard his reputation, literally his credit. "In a word," wrote Daniel Defoe about credit, "tis the life and soul of his trade, and it requires his utmost vigilance to preserve it." Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, 5th ed. (London, 1745; orig. Dublin, 1726), 1:196. See also Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, *Lord Chesterfield's Advice to His Son on Men and Manners*, 5th ed. (London, 1788), 35; Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 51–80.

³ William Smith to Mercer and Ramsey, Feb. 14, 1774, William Smith Letterbook, 1771–1775.

converged with the political actions of American patriots during what later became known as the opening salvos of the American Revolution, we have come to equate the rejection of tea and tea drinking as part of a consumer revolution that combined the language of virtue with the patriotic demands of creating and sustaining an independent economy as well as nation. To reject tea as a consumer item was to reject Great Britain as the master of our American economy and government.⁴

Yet, there was never such an easy division between right, patriotic behavior and wrong, unpatriotic behavior—in either the minds or actions of eighteenth-century colonists. For instance, even though many colonists insisted that merchants refuse to pay the duty on tea and other taxed goods through nonimportation and that all use of these goods cease, they continued to purchase enumerated consumer items, not the least during those times when colonial nonimportation agreements were in effect. Indeed, consumption in itself was liberating to many people, in spite of the condemnation of new “luxuries” and the demand for self-restraint. Consumption fueled the illegal trade engaged in by men such as William Smith. And despite the very public debates over drinking, buying, and selling tea in the colonies, Smith, in his correspondence with suppliers and customers, had little to say about the political implications of the Tea Act of 1773 and its pending impact on American trade. Instead, like other eager Philadelphia merchants, Smith hastily tried to capitalize on anticipated shortages during the boycott of East India Company tea set to arrive in the fall of 1773, and was even protected by those who supported nonimportation. Although a smuggler’s actions could appear “patriotic” on the one hand—avoiding the exchange in British goods by supplying customers with Dutch or French—they could also be “unvirtuous” in that they fed consumers’ desires for luxuries that had a corrupting effect.

Thus, William Smith’s predicament and the swirl of economic discourse and activity generated around the nonimportation debates allows us to explore the tensions between the communal behavioral ideals

⁴ T. H. Breen, “Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 50 (1993): 478–80; Breen, “Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, VA, 1994), 476–77; Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in *ibid.*, 513–22; John E. Crowley, *The Privileges of Independence: Neomercantilism and the American Revolution* (Baltimore, 1993), xii.

expressed in republican ideology and the persistence of individual self-interest that permeated the prerevolutionary marketplace along with the proliferation of commodities. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Englishmen debated how economic activities shaped nations and individual character. On a national level, commerce had become key to the expansion and preservation of the British Empire. Britons promoted and encouraged trade to fulfill their desire to create a commercial empire, but they also struggled to regulate and harness the wealth generated by that trade. They touted the civilizing nature of commerce, insisting that the beneficial moral influence on trade partners outweighed any potentially destructive consequences. Yet, global commercial expansion produced goods and desires that Great Britain did not always know how to control. By the midcentury, economic theorists, and especially merchants and consumers, were in the process of redefining economic behavior, separating morality from merchandising, secularizing market activities, and redefining desire and the accumulation of goods. In particular, they wanted to distinguish the new luxuries arriving from the East Indies or grown in New World colonies as an impetus for national prosperity rather than as a prelude to sin and lost salvation. This period marked a transition from traditional economic sensibilities to a more modern view of the marketplace—really a convergence of seemingly contradictory views. For even as national governments and their merchants praised increased consumption as a positive sign of economic strength, those calling themselves patriots condemned consumption as a sign of individual moral weakness.⁵

Tea, as a luxury item symbolic of the broadening global economy, provides a window into the messy nature of this convergence. First introduced to the British in the 1660s, it eventually had the power to make or break empires, and also personal fortunes. Tea was praised as a beverage that could stimulate the body's health and the nation's industry, but simultaneously condemned as an extravagance that fed scandal and idleness. Drunk by the very rich and the very poor, it represented the changing fashions of a self-conscious consumer class, but it was also politicized in a variety of ways that made it a barometer for loyalties. In their debates over nonimportation and tea, in particular, merchants and their customers struggled with the political and moral implications of consumption. However, boycotts did not necessarily "translate into action the moral

⁵ James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660–1800* (New York, 1997), ix–xiii; Nancy F. Koehn, *The Power of Commerce: Economy and Governance in the First British Empire* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 61–85, 180; John E. Crowley, *This Sheba, Self: The Conceptualization of Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, 1974), 6–12.

component of republican ideology that rejected the debilitating vices and luxuries of the Old World,” as one historian has contended.⁶ Colonists may have been anxious about their economic success and the impact of materialism on their virtue, but they continued to sell and consume these supposedly vice-filled goods unabatedly. Their ability to embrace the contradictions of the marketplace, as much as republican ideology, fueled the revolutionary movement.

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the English had turned their gaze to the wider world, hoping to expand their political power and economic empire. In his *Discourse of Western Planting* (1584), Richard Hakluyt articulated this commercial policy that would “yelde unto us all the commodities of Europe, Affrica, and Asia, as far as wee were wonte to travell, and supply the wantes of all our decayed trades.” Besides resources, exploration and colonization would create new markets to “vente” English manufactures and provide “for the manifolde employmente of nnumbers of idle men.”⁷ By the eighteenth century this mercantilist model came to fruition for Great Britain. In many estimates, commerce rivaled politics and war as a means of conquest and creation of empire.⁸ But instead of leaving destruction in its wake, trade would bring with it the “Means of conveying all Benefits to Mankind,” as one writer optimistically insisted.⁹ Political economists believed that consumption and trade would promote the industry of individuals and encourage them to compete in the marketplace and thereby help bring profit to the nation

⁶ Thomas Doerflinger, “Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation, 1760–1775,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (1983): 214. See also Michael Zuckerman, “A Different Thermidor: The Revolution beyond the American Revolution,” in *The Transformation of Early American History: Society, Authority, and Ideology*, ed. James A. Henretta, Michael Kammen, and Stanley N. Katz (New York, 1991), 178–81, and J. G. A. Pocock, “Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1972): 128–32, who implies that revolutionary ideologies emerged from the tensions between the republican ideals of virtue and the pragmatic, “Court” ideology of commerce.

⁷ Richard Hakluyt, “Discourse of Western Planting (1584),” in *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts*, intro and notes by E. G. R. Taylor (London, 1935), 2:211, 238.

⁸ David S. Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690–1750* (Chicago, 1990), 4; Koehn, *Power of Commerce*, 3–12. John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (1985; repr., Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), 35–38, provides a good definition of mercantilism, which I use in the broadest sense.

⁹ Adam Anderson, *An Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce, from the earliest Accounts to the present Time*, vol. 1 (London, 1764).

through duties and taxes on trade goods. Through careful regulation of foreign imports, manufacturing within the empire, and monopolies, Great Britain could create colonial dependence on English markets and control her peripheral economies.¹⁰

In many ways, England's commercial success depended on individual merchants and their economic interests. Some writers on trade believed the merchant to be the foundation, even salvation, of British society. Daniel Defoe, in *The Complete English Tradesman*, saw merchants as the source of British aristocracy: "trade in *England* makes gentlemen, and has peopled this nation with gentlemen."¹¹ Malachy Postlethwayt, a Scottish economic writer who was especially familiar to American colonial readers, described them as even more emphatically organic to the functioning of the nation. "MERCHANTS AND TRADERS ARE IN A STATE, WHAT THE BLOOD IS TO THE BODY," he stressed, "the abilities and ingenuity of this part of the community, is most certainly of the last importance to the whole British empire."¹² The state, then, to bring glory to the empire, could harness the power of these ennobled merchants by calling upon their enlightened self-interest to help boost the wealth of the nation as a whole. Sir James Steuart, considered by some the father of political economy in Britain, called self-interest "the main spring, the only motive which a statesman should make use of, to engage a free people to concur in the plans which he lays down for their government."¹³

Although advocates of commercial expansion in eighteenth-century Great Britain exalted the role of merchant self-interest in the creation of national wealth, others were more skeptical, raising questions about the potentially destructive consequences of the new economic behaviors that trade promoted. Commerce brought increased individual wealth and a proliferation of consumer goods to England and her colonies that tested older, traditional notions of the moral dimensions of economic life.

¹⁰ William Mildmay, *The Laws and Policy of England Relating to Trade* (London, 1765), 7, 38; Crowley, *Privileges of Independence*, 4–5; Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore, 1998), 6–8.

¹¹ Defoe, *Complete English Tradesman*, 1:322–23.

¹² Malachy Postlethwayt, *The Merchant's Public Counting-House: or, New Mercantile Institution*, 2nd ed. (London, 1751), 67. Postlethwayt's book promoted his plan for a business school that would attract a "better sort" of student. His work was widely available in the colonies by the 1760s. See booksellers' advertisements in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Mar. 18, 1762, Nov. 12, 1762, and Oct. 6, 1763.

¹³ James Steuart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy: being an Essay on the Science of Domestic Policy in Free Nations* (London, 1767), 1:162.

Seventeenth-century moralists believed that the individual was obligated to act honestly in trade, to use his or her resources for the good of the community, since economic activity was a part of God's larger providential plan. They worried that increased commercial activity, or an unnatural pursuit of profit, would lead to excessive acquisitiveness and dishonest practices, such as usury, that would harm the community. More troublesomely, merchants might abuse rather than use credit, an essential component of their business, to the jeopardy of an individual's spiritual well-being.¹⁴ Social commentators of the eighteenth century still worried that the growth of commerce might tempt the nation into sin, but acquisitiveness more often had potentially dire consequences for man's political soul. Jonas Hanway, in his advice to the "Rising Generation of the laboring part of our fellow-subjects," insisted that "liberty is built on virtue, and so is our national strength." Employing similar language to that being used by colonial patriots before the Revolution, he worried that commercial wealth might "deceive us in to our ruin," making his countrymen believe themselves "so much richer than we really are," thus endangering political rights. Instead, he suggested that people "*naturally* turn [their] thoughts to other joys; the pleasures of temperance and humanity; the awful fear of God; and the joyful hope of his favor."¹⁵

Generally, however, the eighteenth century experienced less a moralizing than a modernizing of the economic lexicon. Such laden terms as "profit," "desire," "luxury," even "credit," once suspect for their negative effects, were redefined to neutralize their moral overtones and to encourage or justify participation in the marketplace. James Steuart, in his essay "Of Luxury," differentiated what he saw as the "moderate gratification of our natural or rational desires," from excess, or the "immoderate gratification" of desires. Indeed, articulating a kind of early modern trickle-down theory, he believed that the pursuit of luxury (the consumption of harmless "superfluities") helped entire communities rather than just individuals, because it "necessarily must produce the good effects of giving employ-

¹⁴ See generally Mark Valeri, "Religious Discipline and the Market: Puritans and the Issue of Usury," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 54 (1997): 747–68.

¹⁵ Jonas Hanway, *Letters on the Importance of the Rising Generation of the laboring part of our fellow-subjects* (London, 1767), 2:v. Though not as prevalent as Hume's or Postlethwayt's, Hanway's works were also available through Philadelphia booksellers. See, for example, advertisement for Rivington and Brown, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Sept. 30, 1762, who offered a wide variety of history, geography, travel narratives, literature, and "the best Hyson and Congo Teas."

ment and bread to the industrious.”¹⁶ While “ancient luxury” came at the expense of other people, “Modern luxury is *systematical*,” employing a great number of people who manufactured goods, but also were potential consumers.¹⁷ David Hume, also available to American readers, similarly saw luxury as a means to stimulate production, even to create a system of upward mobility. In his essay “Of Refinement in the Arts,” he contended that luxury “nourishes commerce and industry,” and in turn “the peasants, by a proper cultivation of the land, become rich and independent; while the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty.”¹⁸ Still, there remained tension between this modern concept of luxury’s virtue and the perceived moral implications that came with increased consumption. Daniel Defoe, while an advocate of the merchant, expressed much more ambivalence about new prosperity, pointing out that what looked like economic virtue might contain the seeds of moral downfall. He lamented that even though drinking ale or wearing elaborate and expensive fashions could provide a livelihood to grain farmers, brewers, spinners, weavers, and tailors, excessive use of spirits and fashionable goods could simultaneously take the food out of the mouths of “thousands of families” and turn them into beggars.¹⁹

Whether condemned or praised in theory, the expanding global commercial markets provided a stage that would test the economic sensibilities of Great Britain and its colonies with a proliferation of new, often exotic, goods. By the late seventeenth century, British merchant companies traveled widely to obtain new consumer goods, most of them luxuries, from various parts of the world. From the East Indies, spices—pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, and mace—offered tasteful ways to preserve meats and other perishable foods. Soon more interesting flavors seeped in from the margins of empire: chocolate from Mexico, sugar from India and the Caribbean, coffee from Arabia and Indonesia, and tea from China. The Portuguese first established exclusive rights to trade with China from a restricted encampment on Macao in the sixteenth century, but were soon usurped by the Dutch East India Company, which opened more exten-

¹⁶ Stuart, *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* (London, 1767), 1:307–8, 310.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:325, 326.

¹⁸ Quoted in Crowley, *Privileges of Independence*, 7; see also Carson, “Consumer Revolution,” 514–20.

¹⁹ Defoe, *Complete English Tradesman*, 2:318, 325.

sive European access to Asia in the seventeenth century. The English, although hard pressed by Dutch competition, bought goods from Chinese traders in Bantam and Portuguese traders in Surat, and by the early eighteenth century, the “India men” of the English East India Company traded directly with China, introducing tea, along with delicate porcelain chinaware and silks, to the farthest reaches of the British Empire.²⁰

American colonists were active participants in the consumption of world goods. Due to both the increasing availability of British imports of goods they could not produce themselves, and from desire, they experienced a rising standard of living as they purchased an increasing number of durable and nondurable commodities.²¹ Philadelphia, a key colonial entrepôt that received and distributed goods of the empire, benefited from trade and became home to a growing number of successful merchants and shopkeepers, who not only introduced consumer items, but often took the lead in using them. In May 1724, Peter Baynton, who mainly dealt in coastal shipping of staples like wood, flour, tar, and pitch, ordered six silver teaspoons and a pair of tea tongs for himself.²² New fabrics, silks from China, “India Goods,” “Japans,” silverware, snuff boxes, chocolate, saffron, and, of course, tea and the equipage used to prepare and drink it began to appear in Philadelphia shops during the 1720s.²³

Tea, in particular, emerged as an important commodity of global trade, tying Britain to Asia and providing a medium of exchange in the American colonies. By the 1730s, Philadelphia imported a great deal of tea because it was light and easy to transport and, despite the confusing

²⁰ Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company, Trading to China, 1635–1834*, vol. 1 (Taipei, 1966), 1–3, 9, 72–73; John Bruce, *Annals of the Honorable East-India Company, from their Establishment by the Charter of Queen Elizabeth, 1600, to the Union of the London and English East-India Companies, 1707–8* (London, 1810), 1:11–13.

²¹ Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990), 3–5, 83–86 (for tea); Lorena S. Walsh, “Urban Amenities and Rural Sufficiency: Living Standards and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1643–1777,” *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983): 109–17; Gloria L. Main and Jackson T. Main, “Economic Growth and the Standard of Living in Southern New England, 1640–1774,” *Journal of Economic History* 48 (1988): 27–46; Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake,” in *Of Consuming Interests*, ed. Carson, Hoffman, and Albert, 67, 80; K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1978), 387–88.

²² Peter Baynton to Francis Richardson, May 30, 1724, Peter Baynton Ledger and Letterbook, 1721–1726, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²³ See generally James Bonsall Account Book, 1722–1729, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and Peter Baynton Ledger and Letterbook, 1721–1726.

tangle of tax duties applied to the product, merchants could sell it for “ready money” or on short credit (one to three months), which helped them maintain a needed cash flow.²⁴ And despite wild fluctuations of supply, demand, and price, some merchants managed to make immense profits. Samuel Powel, for instance, often complained to his London suppliers that tea was, at times, a “drug” on the market and that they should send no more. In November 1731, he warned Thomas Hyam “our Town has Tea Enough for these two years they say there is of last years Importation near 2000 lbs.”²⁵ Surplus product certainly affected the retail price of tea, which dropped from its high point of fifty shillings in the early 1720s to a more reasonable seven shillings six pence a pound by the mid-1730s.²⁶ Still, Powel continued to order tea through the 1740s and generally sold it at a 100 percent mark up.²⁷

As the price of tea dropped, a broader range of people—elites, shopkeepers, and the “lower sort”—began to drink tea on a regular basis, their tastes and preferences shaping the course of the tea trade, and also reflecting the emergence of a new consumer class. Although historians have placed annual consumption of tea at under one pound per person, eighteenth-century observers estimated that Americans each drank more than two pounds of tea a year, at least one cup a day.²⁸ Whatever the precise amount, there is no doubt that more people were drinking more tea. By midcentury, tea had become a daily ritual for many elites that punctuated a new leisure life marked by entertainments, visitations, and public celebrations. Elizabeth Sandwith, who married merchant Henry Drinker in

²⁴ John Kidd to Rawlinson and Davison, Aug. 27, 1752, John Kidd Letterbook, 1749–1763, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; James and Drinker to Neate, Pigou and Booth, Nov. 6, 1764, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1764–1766, Henry Drinker Business Papers, 1756–1869, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁵ Samuel Powel to Thomas Hyam, Nov. 12, 1731, Samuel Powel Letterbook, vol. 1, 1727–1739, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See also Powel to David Barclay, Dec. 22, 1730, and Powel to Benjamin Bell, Nov. 6, 1733, in *ibid.*

²⁶ Anne Bezanson, Robert D. Gray, and Miriam Hussey, *Prices in Colonial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1935), 253–54.

²⁷ Powel purchased tea at between two shillings ten pence and three shillings eight pence per pound and could sell it for six shillings to six shillings six pence per pound. See Powel to Benjamin and William Bell, Feb. 2, 1742/43, and to Benjamin and William Bell, Oct. 31, 1744, Samuel Powel Letterbook, vol. 2, 1739–1746.

²⁸ Samuel Wharton, “Observations Upon the Consumption of Teas in North America, 1773,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 25 (1901): 139–40. Shammass, *Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 84, indicates that colonists drank .5 to .8 pounds of tea annually, while Billy Smith, “The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750–1800,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 38 (1981): 170, estimates that a laborer in the 1760s consumed only .2 pounds per year.

1761, carefully documented her activities as a young woman, including a constant round of tea drinking “at Uncles,” “at Betsy Moode’s,” or “with Hannah Callender.”²⁹ Elite males also participated. From the 1740s on, Benjamin Franklin’s records contained receipts for the purchase of green and bohea teas, as well as many invitations for “the favour of his company to drink Tea, and spend the Evening.”³⁰ Hardly a treat for the wealthy, tea also became a staple for a surprising number of working people. Merchants usually kept running accounts for artisans and laborers, who often exchanged work for goods in kind. By the 1760s, tea figured prominently for debtors like Sarah Eagell, a washerwoman; John Williams, a carpenter; “James McBryer, labourer”; John Jones, a brewer; William Standley, a potter; “David Thompson, Ship Carpenter”; “Jonathan Evans of this City, Cooper”; “Mathias Young, Painter”; “John Ashmead, Mariner”; even “Gabriel Jackson, Negroe.”³¹ These working folk bought small quantities (usually one-half pound of tea at three to six month intervals), though proportionally they spent a great deal of their wages on small luxuries such as sugar and tea.³² Indeed, tea in the mid-eighteenth century seemed more a “harmless superfluity,” as defined by James Steuart, than an unobtainable luxury.³³ With 489,180 pounds legally imported to the North American colonies in 1764 and 515,477 pounds shipped the following year, there could be no doubt that Americans had come to love Chinese tea and had grown dependent on British companies and merchants to provide it for them.³⁴

²⁹ Entries for Mar. 2, 1759, Apr. 2, 1759, and July 15, 1759, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 1, 1758–1795, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston, 1991), 13, 15, 25. Elizabeth Drinker noted drinking tea nearly every day between 1759 and 1761, when she married.

³⁰ Israel Wilkes to Benjamin Franklin, Apr. 26, 1767 [14:141b], Benjamin Franklin Papers, searchable text database, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. See also 13:545a; 14:21a; 6:67b, *ibid.*, and Misc. receipts, Benjamin Franklin Papers, American Philosophical Society.

³¹ Samuel Coates, *Ciphering and Invoice Books, 1724–1758*, inside cover; Thomas Wharton Ledger, 1752–1756; Mifflin and Massey Ledger, vol. 1, 1760–1763; John Chevalier Daybook, 1760–1766; Charles Wharton Cashbook, 1765–1771, Wharton Family Papers; William Clarkson and George Morrison Ledger, 1767–1779, Commercial Records, Simon Gratz Collection, all at Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and Breen, “Baubles of Britain,” 457.

³² In the mid-eighteenth century, male laborers were generally paid about two shillings a day, making a pound of tea worth as much as a week’s pay. See James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man’s Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972), 179; Mary M. Schweitzer, *Custom and Contract: Household, Government, and the Economy in Colonial Pennsylvania* (New York, 1987), 51–52.

³³ Steuart, *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy*, 1:307–8.

³⁴ Peter D. G. Thomas, *The Townshend Duties Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution, 1767–1773*, (Oxford, 1987), 28. John Kidd, a Philadelphia merchant speculating on the

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Whereas the tea trade was relatively open in the late seventeenth century, by the turn of the eighteenth century, the East India Company, a consolidation of two competing merchant firms chartered in 1709, emerged as the largest shipper of Asian consumer goods. Because the company had political clout and commanded currency and credit, which it extended to the government, Great Britain shaped the increasingly complicated tax structure to favor the company.³⁵ For example, the “New Duties on Starch, Coffee, Tea, Drugs, Gilt and Silver Wire” of 1713 gave preference to East India Company tea, which was assessed at two shillings per pound, while “all kinds of Tea Imported from any other place or places” had a five-shillings-per-pound duty.³⁶ Not until the late 1740s did tax reform help stabilize the price of tea. In 1745, the excise tax was briefly reduced to one shilling a pound plus a “supplement of 25 per cent *ad valorem*” (or 25 percent of the gross price paid by buyers at auction), but later raised, sending the retail price of tea in the colonies up to seventeen shillings a pound by the summer of 1747.³⁷ In 1748, under pressure from merchants and the East India Company, the inland duty was taken off tea reexported to Ireland and America, lowering the auction price to about three shillings a pound and the retail price to about six shillings six pence by the 1750s. According to one London merchant, the reform made it difficult for small merchant companies to buy and sell East India Company tea, “for we cannot ship any Less Quantity than a whole Lott which is sometimes 900 lb & very seldom less than 300 lb of Bohea.”³⁸ However, even as the tea trade became concentrated in a few hands, the price remained relatively low, promoting further dissemination of the once rare beverage.

“state of the Tea Trade of this Place” for his London agent, estimated that 37,315 pounds of tea were imported to Philadelphia alone in 1750, 43,403 pounds in 1751, and 52,507 pounds in 1752. John Kidd to Rawlinson and Davison, Jan. 28, 1757, John Kidd Letterbook, 1749–1763.

³⁵ Chaudhuri, *Trading World of Asia*, 20, 43.

³⁶ Great Britain, *An Act for laying additional duties on Hides and Skins, Vellom and Parchment, and New Duties on Starch, Coffee, Tea, Drugs, Gilt and Silver Wire* (London, 1714), 365.

³⁷ Chaudhuri, *Trading World of Asia*, 394; Bezanson, Gray, and Hussey, *Prices in Colonial Pennsylvania*, 256–57.

³⁸ John Hunt to Samuel Sansom, June 29, 1748, John Hunt and Isaac Greenleaf Letterbook, 1747–1749, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; *An Act for permitting Tea to be exported to Ireland, and His Majesty’s Plantations in America, without paying the Inland duties* (London, 1748), in Great Britain, *Acts* (London, 1739–1748).

Although the English East India Company and its selected wholesalers came to dominate the world market in tea, for colonial merchants, especially those in Philadelphia, there were other avenues of importation that proved more profitable and also satisfied the demands of the consuming public. By midcentury smuggling supplied nearly three-fourths of all tea purchased in the North American colonies.³⁹ As early as the 1730s, Samuel Powel complained that “a great deal comes over land from New York and it is in so great a Number of Hands who are Continually undermining one another on the Price.”⁴⁰ With tax rebates, the wholesale price of East India Company tea had come down to three shillings a pound by the late 1740s, but Dutch prices remained lower, around one shilling eleven pence. Smugglers also paid less for shipping tea from Amsterdam or the Dutch West Indies.⁴¹ By the 1750s, tens of thousands of pounds entered the colony by way of New York, the Dutch West Indies, Lisbon, directly from Holland, or the Isle of Man. Smuggling tea into Philadelphia was particularly easy. The Delaware River coastline offered many places to land goods before entering the port. Although the tax reform of 1748 required that the Philadelphia Customs Office search ship cargoes and review tea certificates of sale produced in London, the system was underfunded and inefficient, and many customs officials were apt to shut their eyes to illegal trade.⁴² John Kidd assured one merchant house in Lisbon that “our officers are so indulgent here that I can land any other Goods without any risque in the worlde.”⁴³ Another merchant celebrated “the freedom and Libarty of our Trade, being strangers to any interupsion from the Officers.”⁴⁴ Relatively risk free, the low cost and potential high

³⁹ Shammass, *Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 83; Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*, 18; Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, “Smuggling and the British Tea Trade before 1784,” *American Historical Review* 74 (1968): 44–73; W. A. Cole, “Trends in Eighteenth-Century Smuggling,” in *The Growth of English Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. W. E. Minchinton (London, 1969), 121–43.

⁴⁰ Samuel Powel to Benjamin Bell, Nov. 23, 1737, Samuel Powel Letterbook, vol. 1, 1727–1739.

⁴¹ Francis S. Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves: Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies in the Year 1773, by the East India Tea Company* (Boston, 1884), 198; Mui and Mui, “Smuggling and the British Tea Trade,” 48, 53–54.

⁴² See generally, Custom House Papers, 1704–1789, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, especially correspondence of John Swift. American merchants had to produce certificates within eighteen months from the date of sale attesting to the landing of legal tea. *An Act for permitting Tea to be exported to Ireland, and His Majesty’s Plantations in America*.

⁴³ John Kidd to Messrs. Farmer, Narbel and Montia gut (Lisbon), May 21, 1752, John Kidd Letterbook, 1749–1763.

⁴⁴ Daniel Clark to John and Andrew French, May 31, 1762, Daniel Clark Letterbook and Invoice Book, 1759–1763, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

return enticed many Philadelphia merchants to try their hand at smuggling.

Even before the debates over nonimportation, merchants grappled with the implications of their economic interests and consumer demands. Smuggling, in particular, complicated the political morality of the colonial marketplace. Some traders who complained that smuggled tea glutted the market with product and forced the price down also salivated at the thought of the potential gains. In 1757, John Kidd, urged by his London supplier to speculate on the reasons for the drop in legal tea sales in Philadelphia, grumbled that "Since the year 1752 our Imports from Londn have greatly decreased & in the 2 last years We have not imported more than 70 Chests 54 of which are still on hand vz 50 wh Francis & Son & myself so that we have not consumed above 16 Chests legaly imported Tea in 2 years."⁴⁵ Whatever the impact of smuggled tea on his legitimate trade, Kidd also partnered with others to ship tea as contraband. In the spring of 1757, Thomas Willing and Thomas Riché, two of the most successful smugglers of the day, partnered with Kidd in a "Tea Scheme." Willing asked his Lisbon supplier, Mayne, Burn and Mayne, to ship up to two thousand pounds sterling worth of tea for no more than two shillings two pence per pound. He added with a note of caution, "as the whole is Contraband pleasd to get Mr. Kids & my share fully insured where you can depend most on the honour of the Assurers in case of loss."⁴⁶ When the shipment arrived in Philadelphia, he sold most of the lot at seven shillings per pound, and by the summer of 1758 Willing and Kidd as partners had cleared £1515 10s. 11d. in net proceeds with the same amount each going to Thomas Riché and the Lisbon firm.⁴⁷ In October 1759, Riché partnered with Thomas Willing and Robert Morris for a tea shipment directly from Amsterdam, both realizing a gain of £2730 5s. 4d. Again in December 1759, Riché took a lesser profit for his investment in one-sixth of a Lisbon tea venture, while Willing and Morris netted £3058 17s. 7d. for their half share.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ John Kidd to Rawlinson and Davison, Jan. 28, 1757, John Kidd Letterbook, 1749–1763.

⁴⁶ Thomas Willing to Mayne, Burn and Mayne, May 6, 1757, Charles Willing Letterbook, 1754–1761, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁷ Thomas Willing to Mayne, Burn and Mayne, June 28, 1758, in *ibid.*; Accounting Journal, June 27, 1758, Thomas Riché Papers, vol. 1, 1757–1761, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁸ Accounting Journal, Oct. 19, 1759, and Dec. 21, 1759, Thomas Riché Papers, vol. 1, 1757–1761. Between 1755 and 1760 Thomas Riché smuggled prodigious amounts of tea through New York. See Thomas Riché Letterbook, 1750–1763, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Other Philadelphia merchants involved in tea smuggling during the 1750s and 1760s included brothers

Before the mid-1760s, the uncertainty of a volatile market (whether from war or unpredictable supply) and the potential profits from the trade in contraband presented merchants with an opportunity, if not a dilemma. Smuggling, though clearly illegal, served the economic self-interest of some merchants willing to ignore imperial laws to fulfill the increasing demand for tea among colonial consumers. Only later, in the 1760s and 1770s, did patriots draw on merchant smugglers for support of non-importation, as parliamentary acts increasingly hurt their interests, especially in the dry goods trade. Eventually, as merchants of contraband joined the initial nonimportation efforts, some recognized smuggling as a form of political protest that had patriotic connotations. Prior to 1765, however, the economic necessity of a steady cash flow to cover mounting debts led merchants to experiment with a variety of legal, quasi-legal, and illegal forms of trade.⁴⁹

The thriving illegal trade in tea exposed a crucial problem that confronted imperial officials in the eighteenth century; their inability to dominate entirely colonial markets and to claim exclusive rights to colonial resources. After the Seven Years' War, Parliament took the initiative to restore economic control over what it saw as an unruly colonial economy, passing a series of revenue acts to help recover the cost of war in America, and also to pay salaries for an expanded imperial infrastructure. With the Sugar Act, or the American Revenue Act of 1764, Parliament gave new teeth to the existing customs system by extending the Admiralty Court's ability to punish smugglers and to collect duties with the help of British naval ships. Although many merchants trading with the West Indies grumbled about restricted commerce under the Sugar Act, more coordinated protests came in the mid- and late 1760s, with the passage of the Stamp Act and the Townshend Duties. The Stamp Act of 1765 placed a tax on published paper products (newspapers, pamphlets, etc.) and required that any legal transactions (deeds, licenses, indentures, or degrees) be placed on stamped paper, the money helping to defray the cost of the late war and to pay for continued military defense of the North American colonies. The Townshend Acts of 1767, introduced by

Charles and Thomas Wharton. See Thomas Wharton Letterbook, 1752–1759, and Charles Wharton Cashbook, 1765–1771 and 1771–1780, Wharton Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁹ John W. Tyler, *Smugglers and Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1986), 16–17; Doerflinger, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation," 222.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend, were aimed specifically at “effectually preventing the clandestine running of goods in the colonies and plantations” and placed new duties on enumerated trade goods—glass, lead, painter’s colors, paper, and tea.⁵⁰ These duties would provide the salaries of the colonial customs agents and put in place a judicial infrastructure, including an American Board of Customs based in Boston. This board would free judges and civil officers from dependence on local legislatures and increase the use of writs of assistance to go after suspected dealers in contraband.⁵¹

The tax duties imposed by these acts were at the core of debates over the continued tea trade in the colonies, but they were not the only issues of conflict among merchants. Although most Americans did not doubt England’s right to regulate trade, the duties quickly raised constitutional questions regarding Parliament’s right to tax and the relationship between parliamentary authority and colonial economic autonomy.⁵² After passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 and the Townshend Acts two years later, colonial merchants generally agreed to nonimportation of British goods to protest what they saw as illegal taxation and to put pressure on Parliament to repeal the acts. Yet many merchants also had ambivalent feelings about these economic sanctions. They supported them in principle, condemning the encroachment on the colonies’ right to control taxation. Still, many Philadelphia merchants tended to act on economic self-interest. While publicly endorsing the nonimportation agreements, privately they made contingency plans to reap some individual profit amid the general economic sacrifice.⁵³

In late 1765, following the lead of New York, Philadelphia merchants agreed to refuse British imports to pressure England to repeal the Stamp Act. Yet, even those who signed and participated in the nonimportation agreements had difficulty balancing their public support with their private fears of social disorder and lost business. Early in the Stamp Act crisis, Abel James and Henry Drinker lamented to one of their London suppliers, “you will be alarmed with repeated Accounts from the several Colonies on the Continent of America of the riotous Proceedings of many of the

⁵⁰ The Townshend Act, 1767, accessed online at http://ahp.gatech.edu/townshend_act_1767.html.

⁵¹ Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763–1776* (1918; repr. New York, 1939), 52, 65, 94.

⁵² See John Dickinson, *The Late Regulations Respecting the British Colonies on the Continent of America Considered* (1765; repr. London, 1766); Crowley, *Privileges of Independence*, 25.

⁵³ Doerflinger, “Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation,” 198, 217–22.

People, with a view to prevent the Stamp Act being carried into execution." Although the two Quakers thought the Stamp Act untenable, they assured David Barclay that "the better disposed" did not "Countenance such Tumultuous proceedings."⁵⁴ Publicly and to certain friends in the colonies, James and Drinker drew on pervasive republican motifs and condemned "those Badges of Slavery—Stamp Papers."⁵⁵ But to their London correspondents, they portrayed themselves as coerced supporters of a questionable agreement. In November 1765, hurriedly canceling fall orders from two London houses, James and Drinker wrote, "We have only Time to say our Situation is truly alarming, as no Person dare Attempt to use a Stamp Paper, or in the least Degree propose any Thing short of the most fix'd Opposition to it, and that we remain, Your assured Friends . . . P.S. People of all Ranks & Parties that usually Import from England are obliged to conform to this Agreement."⁵⁶ In mid-December, with no mention of the boycott and, perhaps, assuming that the act would be repealed soon, James and Drinker proposed a plan to increase their tea trade, taking advantage of the momentary decrease in supply, "as we think a Profit might be made worth our Attention." They asked Neate, Pigou and Booth to

purchase at different Times & ship as Opportunities may present parcels of the best Bohea Tea, about 10 or 12 Chests every three Months or in such Quantities & at such Times as we may recommend . . . and in consideration of your furnishing the Capital we will charge no Commissions, nor you charge any Interest, but the proceeds shall be remitted to you as soon as we can make Sale thereof wch we apprehend may one with another be in about a Month or 6 Weeks after its Arrival.⁵⁷

Widespread colonial protests successfully forced the quick and complete repeal of the Stamp Act, perhaps dissipating any reluctance or internal disagreement that arose two years later when merchants once

⁵⁴ James and Drinker to David Barclay and Sons, Oct. 14, 1765, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1764–1766, Henry Drinker Business Papers.

⁵⁵ James and Drinker to William Browne, Mar. 1, 1766, in *ibid.*

⁵⁶ James and Drinker to Neate, Pigou and Booth and David Barclay and Sons, Nov. 9, 1765, in *ibid.*

⁵⁷ James and Drinker to Neate, Pigou and Booth, Dec. 17, 1765, in *ibid.* John Reynell, another Quaker merchant, also had a contingency plan during the 1765–1766 nonimportation protest. See John Reynell to Mildred and Roberts, Dec. 10, 1765, John Reynell Letterbook, 1734–1774, Coates and Reynell Papers.

again attempted to instigate and sustain nonimportation under the Townshend Acts. At first, Philadelphia lagged far behind other colonies in adopting resolutions after passage of the revenue duties. Boston called for a boycott in late December 1767. By August 1768, New York merchants had published and circulated their resolutions. The Pennsylvania Assembly, however, ignored requests to join Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia in support of nonimportation; instead it respectfully petitioned Parliament in September 1768 to reconsider the Townshend duties.⁵⁸ The Philadelphia trading community's reluctance to join lay partly in its deep suspicions of Boston and New York merchants and their motives. Although the New York agreement included promises not to "import any kind of Merchandize from Hamburg or Holland, directly from thence, nor by any other way whatsoever," which implied a condemnation of smuggling, Philadelphia traders knew that New York could easily steal away business by providing contraband goods to demanding consumers.⁵⁹ Still, fickle consumers found ways to keep the patriotic fires at the feet of reluctant shopkeepers and merchants. Perhaps driven by the threats of mob violence and boycotts of individual shops, as well as the proliferation of anonymous letters and pamphlets, the Philadelphia merchant association finally agreed to stop importing goods on March 10, 1769.⁶⁰ Thomas Clifford assured a friend that the agreement was accepted "coolly & with great Unanimity."⁶¹ The following month, as one, the group of merchants wrote its London counterpart, warning of the long-term consequences of the Townshend Acts. John Reynell, Abel James, Henry Drinker, William West, Thomas Mifflin, and Robert Morris, among others, noted if the acts were not repealed Americans were "determined not only to defeat the intent of the acts, by refraining from

⁵⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 2, 1769; Robert F. Oaks, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Origins of American Independence," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 121 (1977): 414.

⁵⁹ "A Copy of the Resolves Subscribed by the Merchants in New York Dated 27. August 1768," Manuscripts and documents, 1765–1775, Relating to Pennsylvania's Provincial Non-importation Resolutions, American Philosophical Society.

⁶⁰ Doerflinger, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation," 219, implies that those who signed the nonimportation agreement unambiguously demonstrated "true commitment to the patriot cause." R. A. Ryerson, "Political Mobilization and the American Revolution: The Resistance Movement in Philadelphia, 1765 to 1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 31 (1974): 577, describes the merchant committee of 1769 as "middle-aged, wealthy, generally moderate merchants," as opposed to the younger, more radical members of the resistance in 1774 and beyond.

⁶¹ Thomas Clifford to Walter Franklin, Mar. 11, 1769, Thomas and John Clifford Letterbook, 1767–1773, Clifford Family Papers, 1722–1832, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

the use of those articles on which duties were laid, but to put a stop to the importation of [all] goods from Great-Britain.”⁶²

Still, there were many inconsistencies between what merchants said in public petitions and what they did to salvage their trade. Just as they had under the nonimportation agreement of 1765, when the agreement of 1769 went into effect in the spring, James and Drinker saw an opportunity in the market for profit. The preceding fall, Henry Drinker’s brother had been stuck with some second-rate glass. Because the agreements had no stipulation against selling enumerated goods already on hand, James and Drinker speculated, “Stopping the Importation here and at New York seems the only Chance we have of selling such a Quality.”⁶³ Indeed, they panicked when rumors circulated in June that the acts were to be repealed, “which shall be a hint to us to push off all those articles now by us, before that.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Thomas Clifford laid plans to save his business in the midst of crisis. In the fall of 1769, he sent his son Thomas Jr. to England to learn the merchant trade, giving him not only moral instructions about the evils of the world, but also specific commercial instructions: “if it appears probable the Revenue Acts are like to be repealed by all means keep her [the ship *Betsey*] and send her home in the Spring with such Articles as thee & our Friend Cowper thinks most like to Answer.”⁶⁵

Although James and Drinker initially signed and supported non-importation, like many Philadelphia merchants, who worried less about the common good than personal economic solvency, they remained conflicted about extending the boycott. The postwar period had not been good for the Philadelphia economy. Scarce hard cash and restrictions on paper money contributed to the difficulty of collecting debts and paying creditors. Thomas Clifford voiced a frequent complaint when he told London business correspondent Thomas Pennington in late 1765 that “Our paper Currency is Annually Sinking and must soon be Extinct; Duties on Divers of our imports to be paid in silver before they are

⁶² “Letter from a Committee of Merchants in Philadelphia to the Committee of Merchants in London, 1769,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 27 (1903): 85.

⁶³ James and Drinker to Lancelot Cowper (London), Apr. 9, 1769, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1769–1772, Henry Drinker Business Papers.

⁶⁴ James and Drinker to Lancelot Cowper, June 10, 1769, in *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Thomas Clifford to Thomas Jr., Oct. 22, 1769, Thomas and John Clifford Letterbook, 1767–1773, Clifford Family Papers.

Landed, the Avenues of Trade to supply us with Silver all shut up, business now greatly suffers for want of a proper medium.”⁶⁶ The number of business bankruptcies rose after the Seven Years’ War, affecting both small and large merchant firms.⁶⁷ Similarly, a flood of English goods came to market after the war, pushing down prices and leaving merchants with excess stock on hand. James and Drinker’s rush to get rid of their glass suggests that some saw nonimportation as a way of clearing out excess goods in warehouses. Indeed, soon after the nonimportation resolutions went into effect Quaker merchant Richard Waln told one London firm that “it is a very general Wish amongst the Merchants that it may continue at least one Year in order that they may dispose of the great Quantity of Goods on hand, & contract their Affairs.”⁶⁸ By early 1770, however, fearing that nonimportation of British goods would damage their market share, credit, and profits, some Philadelphia merchants argued for their right to revise or rescind the agreement.

Although they were mostly concerned with markets and the economic health of the Philadelphia merchant community, those who were in favor of revising the agreement still framed their arguments in fundamentally republican terms. Evoking images of their own virtuous actions, they complained that other colonies ignored nonimportation and stole trade away from Philadelphia, thus necessitating revisions to the agreement. James and Drinker grumbled that “the little dirty Colony of Rhode Island has shamefully broken faith with the others, and has imported a ship load of goods as usual.”⁶⁹ According to “A Freeholder,” Pennsylvania’s near neighbor Maryland had “imported, since their Association, three times

⁶⁶ Thomas Clifford to Thomas Pennington, Nov. 23, 1765, Thomas and John Clifford Letterbook, 1759–1766, Clifford Family Papers.

⁶⁷ Baynton, Wharton and Morgan, one of the major players in the American Indian trade, became the most spectacular bankruptcy in the late 1760s, though the Pennsylvania government devised a land scheme to keep the firm from going under. See John Reynell to Henry Groth, Nov. 5, 1767, John Reynell Letterbook, 1734–1774, Coates and Reynell Papers.

⁶⁸ Richard Waln to Harford and Powell, Apr. 18, 1769, Richard Waln Letterbook, 1766–1794, box 1, Richard Waln Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. William Strahan of London noted to a Philadelphia friend that nonimportation gave colonial merchants “who owe money in Britain . . . an opportunity of discharging their Debts at above 20 P Ct Discount, by the Fall of Bills of Exchange. So that, upon the whole, as I always imagined, this temporary Stagnation will be hurtful to neither side of the water.” Strahan to David Hall, Jan. 11, 1770, William Strahan Letters, 1751–1776, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶⁹ James and Drinker to unknown, May 26, 1770, in “Effects of the ‘Non-Importation Agreement’ in Philadelphia, 1769–1770,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 14 (1890): 44–45.

the quantity of Goods which were necessary for their own consumption, and by those means supplied our back countries, and this city.”⁷⁰ Boston, too, was charged with making “large Importations, both contrary to the Spirit and Letter of their Agreement; insomuch that we have reason to believe, they thereby greatly lessened the Weight of the Non-importation Scheme, and were instrumental in preventing the Repeal of the Tea Act, last Sessions of Parliament.”⁷¹ But accusations were not limited to other colonies. Some Philadelphia merchants who had tried to be scrupulous about the sources of their goods, blamed smugglers for wanting to extend the boycott of British goods for their own benefit. William Strahan was convinced that “the artful and factious part of the Community make their own Advantage of public Misapprehensions, and blow the Flame. This has been the Case now: For I am very well assured, that many of the most zealous Sticklers for Non-Importation have themselves been underhand concerned in large clandestine Importations.”⁷²

Not surprisingly, those who argued for extending the nonimportation of British goods also claimed a moral high ground. While merchants who demanded revisions debated the issue as a matter of economic expediency (questioning whether boycotts actually accomplished what they intended), those who wished to extend nonimportation quickly turned from the problems of taxation to a critique of consumption, raising questions about the morality of economic behavior and the impact that a proliferation of goods might have on Americans and American virtue. An anonymous writer who condemned the reluctance of merchants to extend the boycotts in 1770 asked, “Shall we exchange our birthright Privileges for the paltry Luxuries of Great-Britain, which impoverish and destroy us while we consume them?”⁷³ Thomas Clifford, praising the “Frugality & Simplicity of our worthy & venerable Ancestors,” wondered why

⁷⁰ *To the Freeholders, Merchants, Tradesmen, and Farmers, of the City and County of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1770).

⁷¹ Philadelphia, *To the Public* (Philadelphia, 1770).

⁷² “Correspondence between William Strahan and David Hall, 1763–1777,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 11 (1887): 351.

⁷³ *To the Tradesmen, Farmers, and other Inhabitants of the City and County of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1770). Even the Virginia resolutions of June 1770 to extend nonimportation demanded that the subscribers “will promote and encourage Industry and Frugality, and discourage all Manner of Luxury and Extravagance,” which might explain why they failed rather quickly. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 12, 1770. See also Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 88–90.

We find fault with the British Parliament for passing unconstitutional Acts respecting our Trade, laying burthens there on & prohibiting our Legislature from striking paper Currency, but alas we neglect the material & most effectually remedy which is in our Power, make our Wants fewer let our living & expenses be less than our Income.⁷⁴

Others wrote to newspapers to ponder publicly the effects of these luxuries on American life. "The produce of the West-Indies debauches the country, and has already degenerated us into the bare shadows of our ancestors," wrote a "Friend to this Country." In particular, he faulted the "practice of tea drinking [which] has already given the spleen to one eighth part of this country."⁷⁵

Indeed, tea, more than any other consumer item, became associated with luxury and the decline of virtue among Americans, even as it surpassed other beverages in popularity. Clearly, by the mid-eighteenth century, men and women of all classes drank tea. Yet, in the English-speaking world, tea and tea drinking, especially the negative aspects, had become almost exclusively linked with the female domain. Popular and literary culture painted a picture of idle elite or social-climbing women gathered around the tea table, gossiping and dishing out scandal with their tea and cakes.⁷⁶ Thus, the critique of tea during the period of non-importation in America drew on the assumption that mostly women bought and drank the brew, and therefore women were called upon to set a patriotic example by refusing it. Throughout the 1760s, broadsides, poems, and newspapers implored colonists, women in particular, to give up tea. In verse they entreated women to wear homespun and "throw aside your *Bohea*, and your *Green Hyson Tea*, And all things with a new fashion duty; Procure a good store of the choice *Labradore*, For there'll soon be enough here to suit ye."⁷⁷ Philadelphians, who came late to the cause of nonimportation, often used Boston as a model of proper consumer behavior. As early as December 1767, the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* carried news from Boston that "Bohea tea is now wholly laid aside or used but very sparingly in many of the best families

⁷⁴ Thomas Clifford to Lancelot Cowper, Mar. 31, 1768, Thomas and John Clifford Letterbook, 1767–1773, Clifford Family Papers.

⁷⁵ "A Friend to this Country," *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, Dec. 3, 1767.

⁷⁶ David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 104–26.

⁷⁷ "An Address to the Ladies," *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, Dec. 3, 1767.

in this town.”⁷⁸ By 1770, a “Number of Ladies of the highest Rank of Influence” from Boston had pledged to “totally abstain from the Use of that Article [tea] (Sickness excepted).” Others refused “foreign tea, in hopes to frustrate a plan that tends to deprive a whole community of all that is valuable in life.”⁷⁹

Besides associating women with tea and scandal, another set of assumptions maintained that tea and other luxury commodities corrupted the lower classes. Jonas Hanway, in *Letters on the Importance of the Rising Generation of the laboring part of our fellow-subjects*, devoted a dozen or more pages to “Interest of Money paid to Strangers, and the Consumption of Tea, some of the Causes of the Beggary and Distress of a Part of the People.” Referring to “this Chinese drug,” he asserted “if we may judge from the nature of tea, and the universality of the fashion, the expence it creates to the poor, and the contraband trade it occasions, it will in the issue prove extremely hurtful to this nation.”⁸⁰ Popular outrage at the parliamentary acts and general support for nonimportation certainly played a role in depicting the working class as patriotic non-tea drinkers. But in truth, the consuming public’s demand for tea sometimes outpaced its political activism. Workers did participate in direct actions against those merchants who imported from England. Shop boycotts, tarring and feathering, riots, and burning a “wretched Importer” in effigy all served to express otherwise unexercised political opinions on British tax law.⁸¹ Yet, so persistent were colonists’ demands that many members of these crowds also purchased forbidden goods from merchant smugglers, especially tea. Between 1768 and 1773, Samuel Coates Jr., William West, Levi Hollingsworth, Clarkson and Morrison, and Charles Wharton continued to sell tea to shallopmen, tailors, innkeepers, barbers, day laborers, carpenters, shoemakers, bricklayers, blockmakers, plasterers, and, despite the

⁷⁸ *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, Dec. 10, 1767.

⁷⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Mar. 8, 1770. Tea has a rich gendered component in how critics viewed both its physical effects on the female body and moral effects on the female character. Ironically, throughout the period of nonimportation, Boston imported dutied tea from Britain. Using an average of 340 pounds per chest, Boston imported approximately 113,730 pounds of tea in 1769, 54,400 pounds in 1770, 255,935 pounds in 1771, 118,660 pounds in 1772, and 122,910 in 1773 to Oct. 23. Pigou and Booth to James and Drinker, Nov. 10, 1773, “Philadelphia Tea Party Correspondence, 1773–1778,” James and Drinker correspondence transcribed by Francis R. Taylor, 1910, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁸⁰ Hanway, *Letters on the Importance of the Rising Generation*, 2:179.

⁸¹ See for instance, *The Dying Speech of the Effigy of a wretched Importer, which was exalted upon a Gibbet, and afterwards committed to the Flames* (New York, 1770).

warnings of Jonas Hanway, the overseers of the poor.⁸² Consumers and merchants alike were caught between their desire to condemn the economic controls exerted by Great Britain and their desire to participate in the growing commercial economy. Little daily luxuries, scorned as effeminately unpatriotic, also represented a new power over privation.

After heated debates about full or partial repeal, Parliament agreed in April 1770 to rescind the Townshend duties on enumerated trade goods as of December, except for the tax on tea.⁸³ Anticipating the impact of this repeal on colonial importation, in July 1770 New York decided to free everything for trade except dutied articles, which placed Philadelphia merchants in an awkward position. The more radical members of the merchants' committee, Charles Thomson and William Fisher, wanted to extend the general boycott of all British goods. But several committee members who had quit in protest called for a new survey of merchants to see if revisions were warranted. At a general meeting in September 1770, most merchants eventually agreed, at least in theory, to lift the ban on British goods except tea and a few other dutied articles.⁸⁴ By late 1770, trade reopened and markets were flooded with English goods. Eager to get back to business as usual, James and Drinker contacted one of their suppliers, Pigou and Booth, just prior to the formal dissolution of the Philadelphia agreement and placed an order:

Our Merchants and Traders have nearly but not fully dissolved their Nonimportation agreement however we apprehend many orders will go by this Ship, without limitation or exception, (save Teas) and next week we dare say a formal dissolution will take place, which considering the unfaithful and underhand practices of some of the other Colonies, ought to have been the Case some time since.⁸⁵

⁸² See generally, Samuel Coates (Jr.) *Merchants Journal*, 1760–1776; William West *Wastebook*, 1769–1771, *West Family Business Records*, 1769–1804; Levi Hollingsworth *Account Book*, 1768–1775, vol. 535, *Hollingsworth Family Papers*; William Clarkson and George Morrison *Ledger*, 1767–1779, *Gratz Collection*; and Charles Wharton *Cashbook*, 1765–1771, *Wharton Family Papers*, all at *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*.

⁸³ Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, 176.

⁸⁴ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Sept. 20, Sept. 27, 1770; Oaks, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Origins of American Independence," 421; Doerflinger, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation," 220–22.

⁸⁵ James and Drinker to Pigou and Booth, Sept. 15, 1770, *James and Drinker Letterbook*,

Other merchants, such as Thomas Clifford, were more cautious about resuming trade, wondering how renewed trade would impact the economy in the long run. "Our shops are not Quite so bear as one might expect & I am of Opinion when the Trade Opens we shall not find so great a demand for goods as hath been Expected."⁸⁶ The 1770s opened with both optimism and caution, as Philadelphia merchants tried to pick up the pieces of their trade; colonists sought a balance between commercial self-interest and the demand for consumer goods as they tried to make sense of the political ramifications of each.

During the debates over nonimportation between 1767 and 1770, tea had emerged as a symbol of economic and constitutional crisis. Since the tax on tea lingered after the repeal of the Townshend Acts, it is no surprise that tea was, again, the center of controversy in 1773 when Parliament passed a relatively minor act to help the financially strapped East India Company. In the eighteenth century, the East India Company relied heavily on the sale of tea, which accounted for 40 percent of all its Asian imports and was the "fourth most important export from Britain to America."⁸⁷ In 1767, the East India Company lobbied for tax reform so that it could compete with the sale of illegal tea. The company proposed to Charles Townshend that Great Britain give a complete drawback of the 25 percent ad valorem on tea reexported to Ireland or America, which he granted, though a three-shilling-per-pound duty tax remained in America. In return, the company was required to reimburse the government any lost revenue on the export trade and pay four hundred thousand pounds a year as compensation to retain its India territories, which Great

1769–1772, Henry Drinker Business Papers. In November, Quaker Richard Waln had an even more elaborate scheme to get tea into his hand. "I apprehend if the Duty on Tea payable here is taken off, the present drawback or the most of it will be disallowed, should this be the Case, and you can ship mine, after the Act for that purpose has passed the Commons & before it has received the Royal assent or otherwise as the Act may best point out so as to obtain the present Drawback & be landed here after the expiration of the Act laying the present Duty so as to be exempt therefrom." Richard Waln to Harford and Powell, Nov. 14, 1770, Richard Waln Letterbook, 1766–1794, box 1, Richard Waln Papers.

⁸⁶ Thomas Clifford to Lancelot Cowper, Sept. 15, 1770, Thomas and John Clifford Letterbook, 1767–1773, Clifford Family Papers. See also Richard Waln to Harford and Powell, May 11, 1770, Richard Waln Letterbook, 1766–1794, box 1, Richard Waln Papers: "I judge there is now in this City four hundred thousand Pounds Sterlings worth of the old Goods, the consumption having been much diminish'd thro' the discontent of the People."

⁸⁷ Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, 18; Chaudhuri, *Trading World of Asia*, 97.

Britain had helped to conquer during the Seven Years' War.⁸⁸ By the early 1770s, it was clear that the Townshend tax reform had not diminished the substantial trade in smuggled tea to both Great Britain and the American colonies as expected. The East India Company found itself with seventeen million pounds of warehoused tea, and anticipated ships arriving in May 1773 would bring in more than "the ordinary demand of twelve months."⁸⁹ Subsequently, Parliament, amidst heated demands to abolish the trade monopoly, passed the Tea Act of 1773, which kept the three-penny import duty paid in America but allowed the East India Company, free of other customs duties, "to export tea, on their own account" directly to merchants in America, instead of through British wholesalers.⁹⁰ In addition, and more importantly to the company, it would no longer be "liable for deficiencies in the revenue."⁹¹

A complicated set of concerns arose among merchants about the economic and political impact of the East India Company tea consignments. English merchants feared that if colonists bought tea directly from the company at American warehouses with the little bit of hard currency they had, colonists would not be able to pay off their many debts in Great Britain. Some even thought that the shift in emphasis to tea would hurt their access to other East India goods, such as muslins and calicos.⁹² American merchants disagreed whether the direct sales of tea would be good or bad for the economy in general. Certainly some thought that by eliminating the English middleman cheaper goods could be brought directly from the East Indies or from East India Company warehouses, giving the American merchant a new stature in imperial trading networks. But, the company's monopoly on tea (and possible future

⁸⁸ Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, 26–27.

⁸⁹ William Palmer of London to the Directors of the East India Company, May 19, 1773, in *Tea Leaves*, ed. Drake, 189; Schlesinger, *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution*, 262.

⁹⁰ Great Britain, *An Act to allow a Drawback of the Duties of Customs on the Exportation of Tea to any of His Majesty's Colonies or Plantations in America; to increase the Deposit on Bohea Tea to be sold at the India Company's sales; and to empower the Commissioners of the Treasury to grant Licences to the East India Company to export Tea Duty-free* (London, 1773), 897; *An Attempt to Pay off the National Debt, by Abolishing the East-India Company of Merchants; and all other Monopolies* (London, 1767), 20–29; *An Infallible Remedy for the High Prices of Provisions. Together with a scheme for laying open the trade to the East-Indies* (London, 1768), 18–27.

⁹¹ Schlesinger, *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution*, 263.

⁹² Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves*, 218–19; see also Thomas Wharton to Samuel Wharton, Oct. 5, 1773, in *ibid.*, 273.

monopoly on other East India goods) also highlighted the limited nature of a business patronage system that would give great potential profits to a few preferred Americans who could snag a tea commission.

Indeed, the race to obtain that patronage began before the ink even dried on the Tea Act parchment. In May 1773, Gilbert Barkly of Philadelphia petitioned the Court of Directors of the East India Company, suggesting direct sales to America would assure that tea “sold cheaper than can be smuggled from foreigners.”⁹³ He received the first of four Philadelphia commissions for tea. Samuel Wharton, also a vocal proponent of having tea “annually landed immediately from China, in the most central Part of North America, and there being sold, at stated public Times,” managed to get a commission for his brothers Thomas and Isaac Wharton.⁹⁴ Paradoxically, in the summer of 1773, Abel James and Henry Drinker were in the process of consolidating their far-ranging business. They turned down a proposal of trade partnership with William Henry, which they saw as “worthy the pursuit of Men in the Prime of Life” rather than themselves.⁹⁵ Yet, the following month they profusely thanked their good friends Pigou and Booth for recommending their house for a consignment of East India Company tea.⁹⁶ With the chance to reap a 6 percent commission on the sales of their portion of two hundred thousand plus pounds of tea to be shipped to Philadelphia in the late fall, and with less than the usual shipping cost or risk, James and Drinker could postpone retirement.⁹⁷

Once again the rhetoric of republican virtue took aim at economic self-interest. As news of the tea consignments spread along the eastern coast, Philadelphia inhabitants took sides. Although a self-appointed “Committee for Tarring and Feathering” promised any Delaware River pilot who assisted the Philadelphia-bound tea ship “A halter around your neck, ten gallons of liquid tar scattered on your pate, with the feathers of a dozen wild geese laid over that to enliven your appearance,”

⁹³ Memorial of Gilbert Barkly, merchant in Philadelphia for 16 years, to the Court of Directors of the East India Company, May 26, 1773, in *ibid.*, 200.

⁹⁴ Wharton, “Observations Upon the Consumption of Teas in North America,” 140–41.

⁹⁵ James and Drinker to William Henry, July 17, 1773, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1772–1786, Henry Drinker Business Papers.

⁹⁶ James and Drinker to Pigou and Booth (London), Aug. 27, 1773, in *ibid.*

⁹⁷ The Philadelphia tea ship, *Polly*, with Capt. Samuel Ayres in command, carried 568 chests and 130 quarter-chests. Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves*, 256. The usual commission for selling another merchant’s tea was 2.5 percent.

in October more staid citizens called for a meeting of the populace to discuss a measured response.⁹⁸ The meeting's resolutions listed taxation without representation as one of the participants' primary concerns, but the objection to tea, again, went beyond its effect on taxes. At least in print, the opposition feared the negative impact of commerce, in particular the luxury trade, on American virtues and liberty. By December, pamphlets and broadsides warned that tea, though an innocuous pleasure, might be the colonies' political undoing. "If the trifling Duty of *Three-Pence WERE ONLY* to be considered," stressed one author, "it would not be worth our while to oppose it . . . But, that by this Breach (though small) they will enter the Bulwark of our sacred Liberties, and will never desist, till they have made a Conquest of the Whole."⁹⁹ Some writers assured the public that working people—tradesmen (as opposed to merchants), artisans, and mechanics—had the innate virtue to resist these temptations and thus save those "sacred Liberties." "Corruption, Extravagance, and Luxury, are seldom found in the Habitations of Tradesmen," insisted "Pennsylvania," "Industry, Economy, Prudence, and Fortitude, generally inhabit there; and I expect to see these commendable Virtues shine forth upon the present Occasion, with more than brilliant Lustre."¹⁰⁰

It was one thing to claim a moral high ground based on the virtues of frugality and thrift, it was another to get fellow citizens to stop buying tea. When a "Countryman" asked rhetorically, "Did the Minister suppose that we are so far degenerated as to desire the luxuries more than the necessaries of life, that we should desire Tea above all things, and thus fall into his net through the want of virtue?" he perhaps did not expect the answer to be a resounding "yes!"¹⁰¹ Oddly enough, in the larger scheme of consumer behavior, when pressed for cash, people tended to give up food before giving up new luxuries such as tea, sugar, and chocolate.¹⁰² With merchants like William Smith ready to fill any perceived gap in supply during 1773 and 1774, the sale of tea hardly paused for breath. Despite

⁹⁸ Frank M. Etting, *The Philadelphia Tea Party of 1773: A chapter from the history of the old state house* (Philadelphia, [1873]), 6.

⁹⁹ Pennsylvania, *To the Tradesmen, Mechanics, &c. of the Province of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1773).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Countryman, *To the Freeholders and Freemen, in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1773). See also Carole Shammas, "Consumer Behavior in Colonial America," *Social Science History* 6 (1982): 74.

¹⁰² Shammas, *Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 298–99.

the association of tea with idle luxury or British tax policy, there was still demand for the beverage in the Philadelphia area. William Redwood and Benjamin Birkett, supplied by well-known smuggler Charles Wharton in late December 1773, did a brisk business in tea through the following year.¹⁰³ Thomas Scully, a shopkeeper in Christiana, Delaware, steadily sold small amounts of tea to his modest clientele throughout 1773 and 1774, with only a short break in sales during December 1773, when he transferred his stock to a new store in Oxford.¹⁰⁴ Even William Smith's tainted tea eventually sold. Mechanics and laborers might have condemned merchants for selling tea, but more often they complained about inflated prices as they shelled out their shillings to buy it.¹⁰⁵

Ironically, much like the smuggler William Smith, the tea consignees worried about and defended their mercantile reputations against the potentially damaging effects of the tea crisis. They believed that selling tea for the East India Company brought them honor and profit, accusing smugglers of being dishonorable and unwilling to make the economic sacrifices that they wanted imposed on other merchants through non-importation.¹⁰⁶ Smugglers and those who opposed the tea shipments were also accused of acting against the social order by rousing the "mob"—such as boatmen, "Along-shore men," porters, and other retainers "who are all paid highly for their services"—to threaten the consignees.¹⁰⁷ When asked to resign their commission in October 1773, James and Drinker at first refused and claimed "if the Tea did arrive & come under our care, we must as Honest Men do our duty as well as case would Admit for the Preservation of the property committed to our care."¹⁰⁸ Even after the tea ships were stopped, condemned, and returned to England, James and Drinker believed they had acted with principle;

¹⁰³ See sales of tea in Redwood and Birkett Account Books, vol. 1, 1773–1775, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Scully Daybook, 1773–1775, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the best evidence of continued demand for tea among colonists comes from the early years of the Revolution. In 1776 and 1777 nine riots took place in New York and Massachusetts to protest the price or scarcity of tea, not the sale or consumption of tea. Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 51 (1994): 3–38, especially 35–36.

¹⁰⁶ Pigou and Booth (New York) to James and Drinker, Oct. 18, 1773, "Philadelphia Tea Party Correspondence, 1773–1778."

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Booth to James and Drinker, Oct. 4, 1773, in *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ James and Drinker to Pigou and Booth, Oct. 26, 1773, in *ibid.*

because we early declared for receiving the Tea into a place of safety, which in the present state of things amongst us is deem'd very Criminal indeed and as we have uniformly adhered to these Sentiments, we are painted in very odious Colours by many warm Spirits. Indeed no Consideration would have induced us to have stood the storm that has been raised every advantage we could have derived from the Commission on the Teas would have weighed but little, had it not appeared to us to be our Duty.¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, when threatened, Thomas and Isaac Wharton had quickly resigned their commission, not wanting to lose “the affection of their fellow Citizens by their want of an explicit conduct.”¹¹⁰ Yet, neither did they want to alienate the company that had hired them. Thomas Wharton insisted to Thomas Walpole that “if anything could stimulate me to resign in the early manner I did, it was, a belief, that after I had done my duty to my country, I could with more certainty and effect, serve the Honable the East India Company.”¹¹¹ A few days later he begged to be included in any further consignment of tea, “in Case the Honble the Directors shall be pleas'd to ship the same for this Port after the Duty is repealed by Act of Parliament.”¹¹²

In late December 1773, only three days after Wharton's obsequious plea, imperial commercial dreams came face to face with provincial political concerns. Philadelphia was at a standstill. The tea ship *Polly* stood idle in the Delaware River, its captain, Samuel Ayres, under scrutiny by a diverse group of concerned inhabitants. Nearby, leaders of the budding patriot movement bred by the nonimportation actions of the 1760s, met and resolved that the tea would not be landed, but carried back to London in the same ship in which it arrived.¹¹³ On the wharf, the tea consignees,

¹⁰⁹ James and Drinker to Pigou and Booth (London), Jan. 1, 1774, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1772–1785, Henry Drinker Business Papers. They later insisted that “Men of weight & influence in this City” had come to regret several things: “That of sending the Tea back to England & approving publicly the Conduct of the Town of Boston in destroying the Tea—Now say they had we pursued the Legal, peaceable plan proposed by J & Drinker & adhered to it with firmness our Conduct would have been unimpeach'd both here and in England.” James and Drinker to Pigou and Booth, May 31, 1774, in *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Thomas Wharton to Samuel Wharton, Nov. 30, 1773, in “Selections from the Letter-books of Thomas Wharton, of Philadelphia, 1773–1783,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 33 (1909): 320.

¹¹¹ Thomas Wharton to Thomas Walpole, Dec. 24, 1773, in *ibid.*, 321–22.

¹¹² Thomas Wharton to Thomas Walpole, Dec. 27, 1773, in “Notes and Queries: Account of the Arrival and Departure of the Tea-Ship at Philadelphia in 1773,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 14 (1890): 79.

¹¹³ Resolution, Dec. 27, 1773, in Etting, *Philadelphia Tea Party of 1773*, 8.

including James and Drinker, under pressure by the growing crowd, uneasily refused delivery of the tea or to pay freight for its passage.¹¹⁴ On shore, perhaps gleefully looking on, William Smith waited impatiently for five thousand pounds of smuggled tea that promised great profits. Somewhere in the city, Thomas Affleck, Rebecca Steel, Thomas Gilpin, Lydia Denning, bricklayer George Benner, and plasterer Mickal Maganon were buying tea.¹¹⁵

Before the Revolution, merchants and their customers were bound together in a subtle dance of exchange and consumption, creating a language that attempted to define the boundaries of economic patriotism. Paradoxically, republican ideals, which demanded virtuous restraint from luxury, collided with the emerging consumer demands of a modern world. Americans did not reject the modern marketplace in lieu of more traditional patterns of a communal moral economy, as some historians might contend.¹¹⁶ Instead, there was an uncomfortable convergence of disparate economic sensibilities, both “premodern” and “modern.” By 1773, merchants, whether smugglers or not, veiled themselves in republican rhetoric to describe and protect their commercial reputations. They grumbled about imperial tax policies, thus supporting the theory of nonimportation; but they also feared that others less scrupulous would use the opportunity to steal their business. If their religious convictions kept them from smuggling, merchants still found ways around the restrictions of British law and the restraints of nonimportation agreements to earn some profit. Consumers, too, had tasted a new commercial marketplace that had changed the nature of desire. They stumbled between using their new

¹¹⁴ Dec. 27, 1773, Ayres Deposition, Philadelphia Tea Shipment Papers, 1769–1773, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹¹⁵ Redwood and Birkett Account Books, 1773–1775; William Clarkson and George Morrison Ledger, 1767–1779, Gratz Collection; Charles Wharton Cashbook, 1771–1780, Wharton Family Papers.

¹¹⁶ Breen, “Narrative of Commercial Life,” 478. I originally conceived this article in the context of the “moral economy,” asking whether the debates and actions surrounding nonimportation and the sale of tea might fit into E. P. Thompson’s classic framework as spelled out in “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136, and “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York, 1993), 259–351. However, I soon found that those studies assumed a model nonexistent in the American colonies; artisans and working-class patriots did not demand ethical behavior from a corrupted, “modern” merchant class. Instead, merchants and consumers both had their ethical and corrupted moments, while both groups attempted to define their actions as always virtuous and for the greater good. See also, Ruth Bogin, “Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post-Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 45 (1988): 391–425; Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” 3–38.

economic power to make a political statement through restraint and fulfilling their wants through consumption. They chose both, condemning luxury as a trapdoor to their political downfall, yet, as a whole, demanding an increasing number of luxuries that soon permeated their daily lives.

In late 1774, American patriots had to fight an even harder battle between desire and constraint, which required the creation of an association under the Continental Congress to enforce compliance with a colonywide nonimportation agreement. With a more refined arsenal of republican rhetoric, they once more used the concepts of virtue and restrained consumption to mobilize people of varying rank and region. Americans did not have to sacrifice for long, however. The Revolution, as much about the control of commercial markets as about political independence, opened new traffic in American commodities and new sources for fulfilling American desires. China and a prodigious amount of tea lay just over the horizon.¹¹⁷

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¹¹⁷ The *Empress of China*, the first U.S. commercial ship to trade directly with Canton, set sail in 1784 under the auspices of Robert Morris of Philadelphia and Daniel Parker, a New York merchant. As Samuel Shaw, the supercargo, noted, "The inhabitants of America must have tea, the consumption of which will necessarily increase with the increasing population of our country." Quoted in Samuel W. Woodhouse, "The Voyage of the *Empress of China*," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 63 (1939): 25. In the 1790s, besides bohea, William Redwood of Philadelphia provided hyson, hyson-skin, souchong, breakfast green, tonkay, and imperial teas for sale.