

NEW LONDON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

MAY / JUNE 2009

Connecticut's Colonial Coastal Trade

Article based on Joseph Avitable's Ph D. Dissertation, "The Atlantic World Economy and Colonial Connecticut"

Scholars have devoted much attention to colonial Connecticut's trade with the West Indies. Climate differences and the single-minded pursuit of sugar planting at the expense of food production explain Connecticut's trade with the West Indies. However, Connecticut's trade with Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York remains relatively unknown. Connecticut shared the same climate as neighboring colonies. So, why would trade exist between Connecticut and neighboring colonies?

Integration into the Atlantic economy affected structural changes on its participants. Regions in the northern colonies that specialized in trade with the Atlantic economy soon underwent urbanization, as business operations induced linkages diversifying the region's economy, and outstripped the ability of local farmers to supply the burgeoning domestic population. It has long been accepted that Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire could not achieve sufficiency in foodstuffs in the colonial period. From Rhode Island to Maine, rocky soils constrained the growth of surplus grain production, on the one hand, and urbanization in the growing

port towns increased the demand for foodstuffs on the other. The specialization in these colonies aggravated the food shortages. Producers in Maine and New Hampshire shifted their labor away from farming to concentrate on the more lucrative lumber trade. Specialization in sectors connected with maritime activities such as whaling, shipbuilding, the West Indies trade, the slave trade, and fishing, in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, fostered the concentration of population in large urban ports, particularly Nantucket, Salem, Boston, Newport, and Providence. Yet, farms in Rhode Island and Massachusetts were unable to supply these growing towns both for domestic consumption and re-export to overseas markets.

Merchants in these port towns faced a conundrum: cut back on specialized maritime activities in the Atlantic economy and shift resources into domestic food production or seek external sources of food. Ultimately, the decision was made to resort to food imports. Scholars have highlighted the role of the Chesapeake colonies, New York, and Pennsylvania in supplying food to New England. Rice from the

Joe Avitable spoke at our annual meeting in September and graciously agree to share some of that information in a series of articles.

Lower South, grains from the Chesapeake, and flour and bread from the Middle Colonies fed the growing New England urban population. What has not been recognized is that Connecticut was also a crucial supplier of food.

The major reason Connecticut's coastal trade has eluded scholars is the lack of records. Colonial port records have not survived for Connecticut and those surviving for Massachusetts do not indicate any trade between the two colonies. Because this branch was so large and involved so many vessels, port officers decided to not record the vessels trading between Massachusetts and Connecticut. An intense review of colonial newspapers and mercantile correspondence, however, has uncovered the contours of Connecticut's coastal trade.

Connecticut's trade with Massachusetts is relatively easy to track, given the lists contained in Boston's newspapers.

(Continued on page 5)

“Ye Towne’s Antientest Buriall Place” The Brooks Family Tomb

Entering the Antientest Burial Ground from the uphill side (Hempstead St.), one of the first things you come to is a tomb dug into the side of the hill, with a bricked up front and a granite slab across the top, on which is carved “Jonathan Brooks 1786.” This tomb, according to Frances Caulkins, was originally excavated not for Jonathan Brooks but for his daughter Sally, who was killed August 22, 1786, by lightning:

She was in the act of closing a chamber window, in her father’s house, in Bradley Street, when the bolt descended upon the chimney, and glancing in various directions, injured the house considerably ... and striking his daughter upon the right temple, ran down her side and produced instant death.... She was an only daughter, fifteen years of age, amiable and much beloved.... A tomb was excavated in the old burial-ground to receive the remains of the youthful victim, and thither for several successive years, all the flowers that bloomed in her flower-garden, were brought by her relatives and laid on her coffin. (Caulkins, p. 586-7)

Sally Brooks’s funeral sermon was the last sermon preached in the old meeting house on the hill (about where the old part of the Regional Multicultural Magnet School is now). A new Congregational meeting house was built on the site of the current First Congregational Church, which replaced the old wooden building in 1850.

This part of the burying ground is at one of the highest points in New London. During the attack on the town and on Ft. Griswold in 1781, Benedict Arnold “sat on horseback, above the meeting-house, with a small spy-glass in

his hand surveying the scene, and pointing out objects to an officer by his side.” (Caulkins, p. 552) The tradition grew up that Arnold had been on the site of the Brooks tomb. The book *Ye Antient Buriall Place*, published in 1899, helped the legend along by captioning a photo of the tomb, “Tomb of Jonathan Brooks where Benedict Arnold Sat on Horseback Watching the Massacre on Groton Heights Opposite.” This has led some people to think that the tomb was there in 1781, which it was not.

Other than Sally Brooks there is no record of who else might be buried in the Brooks tomb. There are no stones in the burial ground for anyone who appears to be a member of her immediate family, so presumably they are buried in the tomb. These would include her father Jonathan, and probably also her brother Jonathan. This Jonathan was a few years older than his sister, being 13 in 1781 when Arnold’s troops attacked the town.

In 1840 Jonathan wrote a memoir of his experiences that September 6th. His father had taken bedding and clothing to an uncle’s house out of town as a place of refuge, and instructed the two younger boys (aged 7 and 5) to drive the cow there, and the mother and sister to “repair thither with all possible speed.” The two Jonathans rode on the same horse down to White Beach, the father apparently planning to join up with other armed volunteers. The British vessels were almost in, however, so the two struck out cross lots to try to reach the cross road that connected the upper and lower roads. This they did, and met

up with about 100 volunteers. These were advised by Capt. Nathaniel Saltonstall to go behind the stone walls and harass the British whenever possible.

Jonathan was to take the horse home, which he did after a short detour to watch the beginning of the evacuation of Ft. Nonsense on Town Hill. He then waited anxiously for the arrival of the British. However, before they arrived his mother came out with a sack of business papers, which she instructed him to take to the uncle’s house. After some argument he did so, and she joined him about an hour later. Since the little brothers had not shown up yet, she sent Jonathan to look for them. This took him back to town, entering via Main Street. Despite all the smoke and an explosion in a storehouse, his father’s buildings on

(Continued on page 4)

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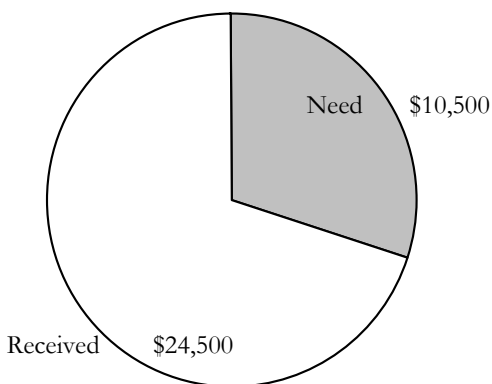
Last evening I attended the City Council Meeting in Norwich to present to them our beautiful new publication: Frances Caulkins *History of Norwich*. This book was made possible by a generous grant from the Sachem Fund, a joint grant program of the City of Norwich and the Mohegan Tribe. We were delighted to be able to accomplish this project in time for the Semiseptcentennial of the birth of Norwich. (That's 350th by the way, and is a real tongue-tier I am sure you will agree!) The official book launch was held on Sunday April 19 at the Otis Library in Norwich, and last evening's presentation was a reinforcement to the City both of our gratitude for their support and of our relevance, as a county-wide organization, to Southeastern CT.

Since the founding of the New London County Historical Society in 1870 important functions of the organization have been both to preserve and, when possible and appropriate, to publish documents and manuscripts that record and celebrate the rich history of southeastern CT. Although this activity was dormant through much of the mid-20th century, the last decade has seen a flurry of activity by our publishing committee. We are proud of our recent republications, including the histories of New London and Norwich, both by Miss Caulkins, and of *A Useful Friend*, Pat Schaefer's excellent companion to the "Diary of Joshua Hempstead," another of our books. Plans continue for more publications, for which we will be soliciting funding support and grants. More of this will be discussed in our next newsletter.

Access to discounts on our publications is one of the benefits of membership in the New London County Historical Society, as is, perhaps more importantly, the knowledge that your membership supports our continuing work in the preservation and publication of our fascinating history. We appreciate your continued support of the Society. We are also especially pleased to note the many renewals we recently received from some of our lapsed Society members in response to a recent "reminder" mailing! To these renewers we offer a big "Welcome Back," and to all of you we invite you to visit us, participate in our programs, volunteer on committees if you are able, use our research facilities, and last but not least - be sure to read our books!

~Deborah Donovan

Annual Fund Goal \$35,000



Your contribution to the Annual Fund is needed now more than ever. A little more than one quarter of the year left to fill the gap.

New and Renewed Members

- | | |
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(Continued on page 4)

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The Brooks Family Tomb (continued)

(Continued from page 2)

Bradley Street were unharmed. There was a bad fire on the Parade area, where the court house, St. James Episcopal Church, and the jail were all burned, so Jonathan turned up State Street until he was opposite Timothy Green’s printing office. A drunken British soldier was lying asleep in the street and Jonathan stole his gun, but could not manage to get it up on his horse, so he threw it over a fence. He went on out of town to his Grandfather Chapman’s, but there was no word there of either his father or brothers.

Jonathan Sr., it turned out, had been helping on the Parade, keeping the fire from spreading. Jonathan Jr. does not mention his little brothers again in the narrative, which probably means they turned up eventually. The uncle whose house the family retreated to, however, Richard Chapman, was killed at Ft. Griswold.

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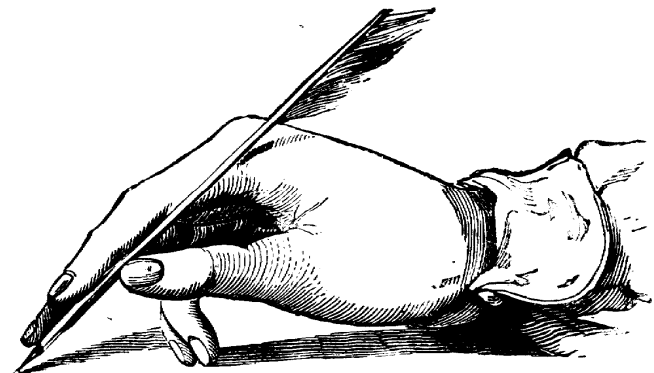
Brooks, Jonathan. “The Experience of Jonathan Brooks At New London, on the 6th of September, 1781,” in Rogers, Ernest E., *Sesquicentennial of the Battle of Groton Heights and the Burning of New London, Connecticut September 6 and 7, 1931*. New London, CT: Ft. Griswold & Groton Monument Commission, 1932.

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~Patricia M. Schaefer



Connecticut's Colonial Coastal Trade (continued)

Throughout the eighteenth century, around 200 vessels departed Connecticut for Massachusetts annually. The 1710 voyage of the Sloop *Speedwell* exemplifies the range of commodities exported to Massachusetts. On this voyage, the sloop carried 385.5 bushels of corn, 127.5 bushels of wheat, 237 bushels of rye, 22.5 barrels of pork, and 4 barrels of beef exported from New Haven to Boston. The size of cargoes varied considerably from vessel to vessel. In 1747, the Sloop *Beaver* carried 181 lbs. of cheese to Boston, while an unnamed Schooner crashed on its way to Boston carrying 5,000 lbs of cheese in 1767.

Connecticut was a particularly important source of provisions for Nantucket, the whaling center of Massachusetts. From the early settlement of the island, settlers knew the sandy soils would not prove conducive to large-scale farming and other economic activities would be needed. Thus, in 1690, or thereabouts, the islanders undertook the capture of whales swimming by the shore. Eventually, over time, this industry transformed into deep-sea whaling. The concentration of shipbuilding, cooperage, and processing industries on an island without a sufficient domestic supply of foodstuffs forced the islanders to import foods from the coastal trade. Because of the short distance between Connecticut and Nantucket, often times, very small vessels made the voyage. In 1761, the Schooner *Eagle* carried only 20 barrels of cider to Nantucket. Yet, at times, the individual vessels carried substantial cargoes. Lebanon, Connecticut merchant Jonathan Trumbull dispatched his Sloop *Speedwell* to Nantucket in 1751 carrying 88 barrels of beef, 32 barrels of pork, 187 lbs of

cheese, and butter and lard. This cargo valued at £3346 (Old Tenor) was traded for 200 barrels of spermaceti oil.

Connecticut merchants used commercial contacts with Nantucket to construct a complex transatlantic trade. Lebanon, Connecticut merchant, Jonathan Trumbull Sr, along with his business partners, maintained a continuing commercial relationship with Sylvanus Hussey, a Nantucket merchant, in the 1750s. Throughout that decade, Trumbull and his partners exported barreled beef and pork to Hussey, in exchange for massive cargoes of whale oil, most of which was then exported to London to pay for manufactured goods. In September, 1751, Hussey notified Trumbull & Co, "I have had a quantity of oil ready for your sloop...as for the provisions, I would have no small cattle... but hope you will put up what shall be fat and good, I think the season will allow it such, I shall crave if may get 20 or 30 barrels of pork, it being early to kill, but shall want some this fall." In response to this letter, Trumbull & Co. assembled close to 200 barrels of meat and some cattle for export to Nantucket. Trumbull & Co. either directly exported the whale oil to London from Connecticut or sent it to neighboring ports for re-export to England. In 1754, Trumbull sent 59 casks of spermaceti oil, purchased in Nantucket, to Boston, for further export to London on the Snow *Apollo*, a payment for further manufactured goods.

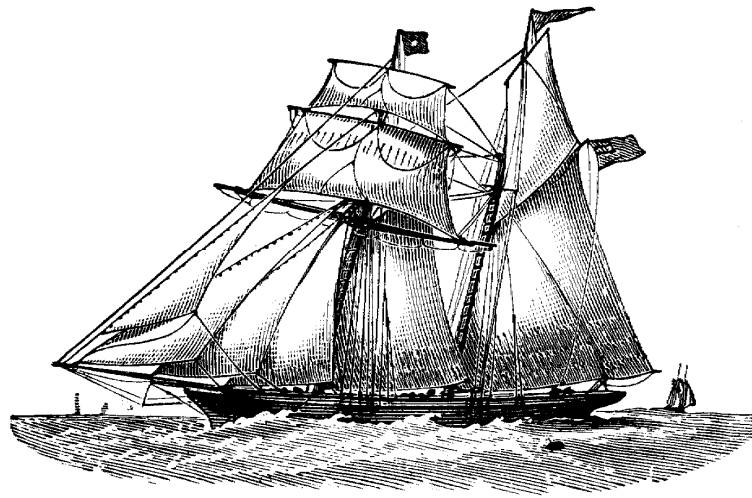
Connecticut's trade with Rhode Island is almost invisible in the records, for the surviving newspapers usually do not list vessels engaged in this branch. This omission, however, downplays an

important avenue of the coastal trade. Connecticut vessels supplied a range of foodstuffs to Rhode Island over the course of the eighteenth century. The Connecticut-Rhode Island trade often involved very small vessels carrying small cargoes. For instance, in 1747, the Sloop *Flying Fish* carried 29 barrels of good beef and 1 barrel of tallow from New London to Newport. In February 1732, the Sloop *Thankful and Ann* transported 116 bushels of oats to Rhode Island. In January 1767, William Potter shipped 8 barrels of beef and pork and 1,000 lbs. of cheese from New London to Newport. These few examples exemplify the range of foodstuffs carried from Connecticut to Rhode Island. Given that Rhode Island ports were situated right next to New London, there was probably a large volume of trade that existed beyond the scrutiny of naval officers. Some of this food was probably imported and then immediately re-exported to the West Indies. This begs the question of how much of Rhode Island's West Indian trade was really a re-export trade in Connecticut products. However, given the sheer volume of "Connecticut pork" being advertised in Rhode Island newspapers, it is clear that a substantial portion of this food was consumed in the domestic market. Connecticut merchant Jonathan Trumbull engaged in a small, but lucrative trade with Newport from the late 1740s to the mid-1750s. The predominant commodities that Trumbull exported to Newport consisted of barreled pork and beef. Most, if not all, of Trumbull's shipments seemed to have been consumed in Newport, as each letter written by merchant

Ebenezer Gray to Trumbull warn of shortages of barreled meat in the town.

Unlike the rest of New England, Connecticut enjoyed soils with far greater fertility, particularly in the Connecticut River Valley and coastal regions of Long Island Sound. Thus, Connecticut never had to import food to feed its population. Indeed, over the course of the eighteenth century Connecticut was a net-exporter of onions, barreled meat, wheat, bread, flour, corn, and a variety of other grains. Almost all this food going to Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

Connecticut food exports reached such a height that shopkeepers in Boston and Rhode Island regularly advertised Connecticut foodstuffs, particularly pork and onions. Connecticut foodstuffs had become branded commodities throughout New England. For example, along with English and Indian manufactured goods, Providence shopkeepers Richard Jackson and John Updike advertised Connecticut flax and onions. Along with Jamaican rum, Gile Tidmarsh's store on Long Wharf in Boston advertised "Connecticut Indian Corn." Connecticut commodities such as "choice Connecticut pork," "Connecticut oats, by large or small quantities," "best Connecticut Indian corn," "choice Connecticut cheese," and "good Connecticut onions," adorned the shelves of general stores from Philadelphia to New Hampshire throughout the eighteenth century. Connecticut pork, in particular, was a popular food item for the northern colonies, for most general stores seemed to advertise this commodity. A general store in Providence Rhode Island advertised pork "just imported from South-Carolina, and equal in quality to any brought to market from Connecticut." ~



National Maritime Day 22 May

Jibboom Club No. 1 will once again this year parade through New London in honor of National Maritime Day. This year that parade will be recreated on Saturday 16 May, from 10 to noon, as the "Jibboom Club" (portrayed by members of Flock Theatre Company), the Ladies' Seamen's Friend Society (including Miss Perkins), a whaleboat from Mystic Seaport, a 1922 REO fire truck, and the Ancient Mariners Fife & Drum Corps join the Hope Week Parade sponsored by the New London School District.

A cannon salute at noon on Friday, 22 May, will signal the beginning of the

memorial service honoring those who served in the Maritime Service during World War II. Graduates of the US Merchant Marine Academy at Fort Trumbull will be joined by members of the US Navy Armed Guard. The public is invited to attend the service, which will be held at Maritime Green, the park on East Street near the US Coast Guard Station at Fort Trumbull. Following the service there will be a luncheon at the Conference Center at Fort Trumbull. Lunch is \$15, please RSVP to Chris Mullaney at 860.434.0313.



June Second Sunday — Flag Day

Join us at 2pm on the 14 of June at the Shaw Mansion for a special Second Sunday program focusing on the American flag. Once again you'll be surprised by the treasures we hold for posterity.