Biography Formation, Knowledge Acquisition, and the Growth and Transformation of Cities During the Late Mercantile Period: The Case of Boston, 1783-1812

Points of Departure

Women and men make histories and produce places, not under circumstances of their own choosing, but in the context of already existing, directly encountered social and spatial structures, in the context of already existing social and spatial relations which both enable and constrain the purposeful conduct of life.

This core maxim, and all the other propositions and aphorisms that follow from it, suggest at least one question that ought to be of significance to the interpretation of mercantile port development. How is human agency to be inserted into any interpretation of the growth or stagnation of port cities during the late mercantile period without denying the critical role of constraining and enabling structural conditions?

I intend to address this question in three stages. First, Fernand Braudel’s monumental works on mercantile capitalism will be briefly evaluated in terms of what they have to say about structure, the agency exercised by merchants, and geographically specific historical processes. Second, I will refer to certain elements of a theory of local and regional transformation. Third, there will be a sketchy showing of

some evidence concerning the interplay of individual knowledge acquisition, biography formation, and the growth of Boston between the end of the Revolutionary War and the outbreak of the War of 1812.

Braudel on Structure, Agency, and Process

Braudel's brilliant, insightful descriptions of the mercantile period rest on a three-fold division of the economic realities which prevailed from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries.1

At one level of observation Braudel focuses on the daily routines of material life. This was the "infra-economy," the repetitious and unspectacular world in which essential commodities were concretely produced and consumed by real human beings, the world in which the barter of goods and services occurred. It was through these daily routines that "an ancient society and economy" were prolonged and very subtly modified. It was also through the living out of material life that a gradually emerging "higher form of society" was erected and fully shouldered from below.2

Economic life and the market economy occupied an intermediary position, intersecting at various points with "the ocean of daily life that lay stretched out beneath it and the capitalistic mechanism that more than once manipulated it from above."3 This was a "higher and more privileged level of daily life," the world of "down-to-earth," calculative exchange, based on competition.4 It was the world of "daily market exchanges" involving rural producers, small shops, workshops, banks, exchanges, fairs, and markets per se.5 It was the world of normal, "transparent" exchanges, "in which each party knew in advance the rules and the outcome, and for which the always moderate profits could be roughly calculated beforehand."6 It was the world of "micro-capitalism," barely distinguishable from ordinary work and dependent on agricultural and urban specialization, on the "progressive division of labor."7

At the highest level, according to Braudel, sat mercantile capitalism itself, encroaching "on all forms of life, whether economic or material, however little they lent themselves to its manoeuvres."8 This was the "high-profit zone"9 where transactions were anything but routine and where risks were considerable. This was a world of "mighty" long-distance trade networks controlled by a very small group of merchants whose operations... already seemed diabolical to common mortals" — a world of "sophisticated and dominating exchange," feeding "off of states, societies, and classes to which it was essentially alien and frequently hostile."10 This was a world where the circulation of capital proceeded slowly, where the mounting of large-scale ventures usually involved "recourse to credit, to other people's money," and where the ultimate aim was to deal in goods which could be acquired cheaply in one market and sold dearly in another.12

This three-tiered schema is implicitly and explicitly connected to a vision of economic and social history as a set of several overlapping, interpenetrating processes that unfold simultaneously at different temporal scales. As a counterpart to material life, there is economic and social history as the longue durée, as the reproduction and almost imperceptible transformation of daily production and consumption practices over numerous decades or centuries.13 In parallel to economic life and the market economy there is economic history as a series of rhythms, vibrations, and waves, as the "bewilderingly complex succession" of short-term and seasonal fluctuations, of "medium-term" cycles (the fifty-year Kondratieff cycle, the double or hypercycle, the intercycle"), and of long-term secular trends.14 By extension, mercantile capitalism as a historical process is a strong tidal force that sweeps along the context-embedded, ephemeral "events" perpetrated by "individual men."15 Braudel's characterization of historical dynamics, in keeping with the holistic tradition of Bloch and Fevre, is rounded off by a subset of "non-economic conjectures" whose temporal durations correspond to the various trends and cycles of the market economy. For example, "comparable... to the secular trend are long-term demographic movements, the presence or absence of social mobility in a given society, the intensity of industrial growth; parallel to the medium-term economic trend are rates of industrialization, the fluctuations of state finances and wars."16

All economic and social history is acknowledged to be geographically specific. Thus, there are interwoven geographic counterparts to Braudel's triptych of the mercantile period. Material life, with its daily round of activities, occurred in place. Its execution was confined in space to the physical setting of a single place or locale — to the settled core and surrounding fields of a single agricultural village; to the homes, shops, and streets of a single town or city.17 Economic life and the market economy, with their frequent routinized exchanges, required the spatial linking of market towns with surrounding villages and any smaller urban settlements that might be dependent upon them. The operations of mercantile capitalism, by definition, were synonymous with trade connections between geographically distant points within the same country or "world-economy."18

Braudel's three-fold compartmentalization of the mercantile period may be translated to cover the development of individual ports in something like the following terms. Over any given period of time,
the growth or decline of a particular port would have been the consequence of the coexistence and interpenetration of several processes. These include:

1. the continuous reproduction of production and consumption practices within the port itself and its surrounding agricultural or commodity hinterland;
2. the larger-scale unwinding of economic cycles, secular trends, demographic movements and political-economic strategies insofar as they affected either a) the prices and rules involved in local town-country market exchanges, or b) the specific investment decisions and actions of resident merchant capitalists; and
3. the total cumulation of long-distance trade decisions put into practice by local merchant capitalists.

Port growth or decline over that same period also would have been a consequence of conditions sedimented from the past. For the fortunes of the port also would depend on the "economic area assigned it by its [relative] situation" vis-à-vis producing areas and other ports; "its [previously accumulated] wealth [and network of credit sources]; and its long-term context."19

In light of all this, what more precisely is to be made of the interrelationship between structure and agency in the development of particular mercantile-period ports? On most counts Braudel would appear to attach relatively little significance to the agency of individual merchants. Highly visible events, or critical individual actions, are nothing more than "surface disturbances:" "they pass across [the] stage [of history] like fireflies." Resounding events are often only momentary outbursts, surface manifestations of . . . larger movements and explicable only in terms of them.20 Yet, merchant capitalists are seen as "alone" having had at least "comparative freedom of movement," being "both sufficiently informed and materially able to choose the sphere of [their] action."21 After all, the "essential characteristic of [mercantile] capitalism was its capacity to slip at a moment's notice from one form or sector to another, at times of crisis or of pronounced decline in profit rates."22 As the moment dictated, merchant capitalists "could swing to one side or the other, turn simultaneously or alternately to the profits of trade or those of manufacture, perhaps to income from real estate, loans to the State or usury."23

Braudel's entire framework and its port-development translation, I believe, would gain from a conceptually clearer treatment of structure and agency. Although Braudel most impressively presents a view of history as multi-layered, mutually encroaching processes simultaneously operating at different geographic scales, he unfortunately — and perhaps unintentionally — explicitly restricts structure to the slow-moving and relatively unchanging conditions of the longue durée. But, clearly, there are always structural elements at each of the superimposed, interpenetrating temporal levels and geographic scales at which social and economic history unfolds.24 This is especially evident if one employs the following terms — consistent with those of the aphorisms and propositions introduced in Chapter 1 — to conceptualize "social structures" and any economic or political structures subsumed under that rubric.

1. Social structure is made up of those power relations — including the control over material, authoritative, or symbolic resources — and associated rules of behavior that are already built into a specific historical and human-geographical situation, or into a historically and geographically specific social system.
2. Whether they be formal or informal, explicit or implicit, a social structure's component rules are humanly produced and learned. Whatever their nature, they form the underlying grammar of activity and behavior in particular contexts.
3. The power relations of a social structure may exist among different individuals, among different groups or classes, among different institutions, and among individuals or groups on the one hand, and institutions on the other.
4. The rules and power relations of social structure not only constrain and enable human agency and practice. They also are the unintentional or intentional consequence of human agency and practice. The shaping of practice by structure and the reproduction or transformation of structure by practice are always part of the same structuring process.

Thus, the persistent material life of the longue durée (and the "social hierarchies" that rested upon it)25 was not structural purely on its own. Its duration depended upon an uninterrupted dialectic between practice itself and the social reproduction of rules and power relations, and upon the parallel emergence of socially produced "spatial structures."26 And, although he is not explicit about it, Braudel also recognizes that economic life was inseparable from structuring processes. This is so since he emphasizes the unbreakable link between marketing practices, and rules and power relations in the form of unequal exchange, particularly between merchants and peasants. Likewise, his portrayal of merchant capitalism is suggestive of structuring processes to the extent that it binds the practices of large-scale merchants with both the accumulation of power and the
elaborate rules applying to exchange behavior as well as to credit provision and acquisition.

If Braudel's three tiers of reality are reformulated in this manner, the development of individual ports during the mercantile period becomes, by definition, a matter of several structuring processes that coexisted and locally interpenetrated with one another through the time-space specific practices of mediating agents, through the lived biographies of actual people. The practices of small-scale merchants mediated between the structuring of material life and the structuring of mercantile capitalism. In addition, the practices of mercantile capitalists mediated between the structuring of both economic and material life, and the structuring of the wider political-economic environment. (The trade policies and strategies of political units are equitable with rules and power relationships resulting from the agency of power-holding individuals or groups operating with already structured contexts.)

If all this is true, the intentional actions, or agency, of merchants and capitalists, however constrained by macro-structural conditions, could have made a difference. The developmental path of no port was either historically foreordained, totally prescribed by geographic site and situation, or completely determined by economic cycles and trends. (Economic cycles and trends are themselves viewable as the complex aggregate product — not sum — of a multitude of geographically distinct structuring processes.) There were always unique elements to the local dialectics of practice and structure that were embedded in the place-particular sedimentation of previous processes. Through their pricing stratagems, total refusal to buy, or offering of advice to long-standing peasant clients, merchants could affect agricultural practices and thereby the short- or long-term course of port development. Through the success or failure of their large-scale ventures, mercantile capitalists affected the magnitude of local population-supporting multiplier effects and the availability of resources for future long-distance trade enterprises and manufacturing investments. It may well be true, in general, that the "effectiveness" of the mercantile capitalist "depended not only on his innate qualities but also on the position in which he found himself." It may well be true, in particular, that one did not "really need to be a genius to succeed in business, if one had had the good fortune to be born a Dutchman in the seventeenth century and to have been placed among those who controlled the mighty machine of the Oost Indische Compagnie." But neither the presence of the Oost Indische Compagnie in Amsterdam nor the already-existing trading environment capitalists found themselves within in other ports were mere givens or the product of spontaneous combustion. In every instance, such enabling or constraining contextual circumstances were the residue of previous structuring processes, of previous human agency that, at one and the same time, arose out of prevailing structural properties and contributed to the reproduction of transformation of structural properties.

Local and Regional Transformation as a Historically Contingent Process

The critique of Braudel thus far presented arises largely out of the discourse of structuring theory and what Giddens terms the "theory of structuration." Further directions for inquiry into the interplay of structure and agency in the growth or stagnation of mercantile ports may be derived from certain elements of a theory of local and regional transformation as a historically contingent process. That theory, which is meant to inform the questions posed by empirical researchers, builds upon an integration of structuring theories and "time geography," and regards all places, including ports, as being in a constant state of becoming. The theory depicts local transformation (and reproduction) as inseparable from the local unfolding of coexisting, or colinear, structuring processes that are not subject to universal laws; as involving a ceaseless dialectical interweaving of the reproduction (and transformation) of social and cultural forms (the making of social, economic, political, and cultural histories), the materially continuous formation of biographies, and the transformation of nature or the production of space (the construction of human geographies). Since the theory has been presented at length elsewhere, and since it encompasses most of the propositions presented in Chapter 1, I will confine myself here to a succinct restatement of certain fundamentals. Given the question posed at the outset of this chapter, the emphasis will be on those elements pertaining to biography formation and individual knowledge acquisition.

The structuring theory discourse

Bhaskar, Bourdieu, Abrams, Giddens, and others identifiable with the structuring theory discourse sometimes differ considerably in their selection of foci and categories. However, they all regard practices and structures as equally "real," while denying that human beings are nothing more than the mechanical bearers or passive dupes of structure. Moreover, while they more or less agree with what already has been said regarding the character of social structures, structuring theorists
generally also share certain other overlapping and interlocking views that may be highly synopsized in the following manner.\(^{30}\)

1. For any given area, social reproduction is a constantly ongoing process that is inseparable from the day-to-day performance of institutional activities (including those mundane practices associated with the institution of the family or household). More precisely, such activity performance results in the perpetuation or modification of the institutions themselves, the knowledge necessary to repeat or create activities, and already existing structural relationships.

2. Through socialization, rules of behavior are absorbed and become taken for granted, and the skills and competencies appropriate to given social contexts are acquired and reinforced. Socialization occurs through participation in institutional activities. Socialization persists through adulthood, for societal institutions are not a "static or finished order"\(^{31}\) but are themselves in a state of becoming through human activity.

3. In the simultaneous unfolding of socialization and social reproduction, the individual and her consciousness are shaped by society while society is unintentionally and intentionally shaped by the individual and her consciousness. Or, socialization and social reproduction (and transformation) always become one another.

4. In order to deal with the dialectical relationships between individual and society, with the constant becoming of both, one must really deal with material continuity and the dialectics of practice and structure (which are synonymous with structuring processes).

5. As structuring processes relentlessly unfold, the structural properties of any social system express themselves through the operation of routine and non-routine daily practices. At the same time, daily practices generate and reproduce the micro- and macro-level structural properties of the social system in question.

**Time-geography**

Most of the key figures associated with the structuring theory discourse recognize in various ways that all practices, all social activities, take the form of concrete interactions in time-space. None of them, however, capture or fully account for the material continuity and uninterrupted time-space flow of co-existing structuring processes. One may bridge this shortcoming by employing the concepts of "path" and "project," as developed by Torsten Hägerstrand and others who have embellished upon his original time-geographic framework.

Since each of the actions and events consecutively making up the existence of an individual has both temporal and spatial attributes, time-geography allows one to conceptualize or diagram the biography of a person at daily or lengthier scales of observation as an unbroken continuous path through time-space subject to various types of constraints. In time-geographic terms, a project consists of the entire sequence of simple or complex tasks necessary to the completion of any intention-inspired or goal-oriented behavior. Each of the sequential tasks in a short- or long-term project is synonymous with the coupling together in time and space of the uninterrupted paths being traced out either by two or more people, or by one or more persons and one or more physically tangible inputs or resources such as buildings, furniture machinery, and raw materials.\(^{32}\)

Given these definitions, the detailed situations and material continuity of co-existing structuring processes may be seen as perpetually spelled out by the intersection of particular individual paths with particular institutional projects occurring at specific temporal and spatial locations.

*Local transformation, knowledge acquisition, and biography formation: Some rephrased and additional propositions*

The sedimented array of practices and corresponding power relations, or the set of ongoing structuring processes, present within place at a given time limits and facilitates what forms of practical discursive, and other forms of knowledge are locally available and thereby, what new practices may subsequently appear. Or, since doing and knowing are dialectically intertwined, the character of knowledge and unknowing in a place enables and constrains the projects that eventually may occur or be innovated there; it enables and constrains the forms of local transformation that may be generated.\(^{33}\)

The detailed attributes of knowledge and unknowing that may affect local transformation will depend to some degree on the extent to which local institutions are either engaged in nonlocal interactions, or nonlocally controlled or influenced.

In any settled area or place, certain institutional projects are dominant in terms of the demands they make upon the limited time and resources of the resident population and the influence they therefore exert upon what is doable and knowable. Dominant institutional projects are associated with the most important power relations within a given place, and they are usually, but not always, identical with th
operation of a locally significant mode of production. By definition, they account for the most significant path-project intersections that occur as part of the unfolding of structuring processes in that place. Owing to their time-allocation and scheduling priorities, dominant institutional projects periodically or persistently structure daily paths by influencing the sequence and pace of the other institutional and independently defined projects a person actually undertakes, and by time-geographically constraining participation in yet other projects.34

Individual biography formation — including language acquisition, the development of personality and identity, the evolution of a not always articulated or self-understood ideology, and the development of consciousness — is one with bodily engagement in place-bound structuring processes, one with local reproduction and transformation. Biographies are formed through local reproduction and transformation, and local reproduction and transformation occur through the formation of biographies. Moreover, in tracing out her unbroken path through time-space, in progressing from one institutional or "independently" defined project to another, a connectedness is imparted to the formation of a person's biography through a complex "external-internal" dialectic and a "life path/daily path" dialectic.

The "external-internal" dialectic is meant to suggest how a person's corporeal actions and mental activities, how the time-space flux of her body and her flow of intentionality, are inseparably merged with one another as she intentionally and unintentionally contributes to social reproduction and local transformation. The dialectic may be distilled down to three statements.

1. External physical action, or project participation and any related travel, cannot occur without resulting in internal mental activity, either as a consequence of a confrontation with specific personal contacts, elements of the environment, or information, or due to the experiencing of specific emotions and feelings.
2. Yet, the addition of external or physical actions to an individual's path requires some internal activity — self-reflection, the recognition of scene-embedded codes, the performance of practical reasoning, the formation of intentions or unconscious goals, the imaginative creation of new project possibilities, or the making of choices between new or already existing project alternatives that are possible within existing power relations and that do not violate basic time-geographic constraints.35
3. Such mental activity is itself intricately based on the experience, knowledge, and predispositions acquired by that individual through previous participation in time-space specific projects. Or, such mental activity is apt to be characterized by some form of intercontextuality, by an imaginative translation of already acquired categories and meanings that enables the reading of one here and now situation from previously encountered situations.

The "life path/daily path" dialectic involves the interplay between long-term commitment and daily practice, and is central to the local and wider reproduction of group, class, and gender differences. Through the operation of this dialectic, the long-term institutional roles among which a person may choose at any biographical point are, in essence, both walled off and thrown open by the manner in which her previous institutional role commitments have affected certain of her specific daily paths, and thereby her knowledge, cultural capital, and predispositions.

Biography Formation, Knowledge, and the Growth of Boston, 1783-1812

Expansion and its macro-structural context

Although it possessed a well-protected harbor capable of accommodating about 500 ships, Boston had little else in its locational favor. It had no major river, such as the Delaware, the Hudson, or the St. Lawrence, reaching far into an abundant interior. Unlike New York and Philadelphia, it did not belong to a political unit whose territory extended to the waters of the Great Lakes or the Ohio-Mississippi river system. Its "natural" hinterland was attenuated by the mountainous barrier of the Berkshires and characterized by hilly topography and gravelly, boulder-strewn soils. Its limited hinterland could not be tapped for the type of goods that would ensure success as a colonial entrepôt. "No staple of ready sale in England, like Virginia tobacco or Canadian beaver, could be produced, or easily obtained. Forest, farms, and sea yielded lumber, beef, and fish. But England was supplied with these from the Baltic, and by her own farmers and fishermen."36 These were not conditions that portended well for the expansion of population and the accumulation of wealth, yet Boston's growth performance was comparatively remarkable from colonial times through the prerailroad decades of the nineteenth century.

Not until just before 1760, when Boston's population exceeded 15,000, did the city relinquish its position to Philadelphia as "the greatest emporium of British America."37 Lacking any "staple with which to make returns for their vast consumption of English dry goods and other wares," Boston's prerevolutionary merchants, like those in
some lesser New England ports, had based their activity on "the fisheries, the (West Indies) molasses-rum trade, the marketing of slaves and the coastwise traffic" — in short, on "a network of trade routes that covered well-nigh half the world." By 1779, midway through the Revolutionary War, Boston had been abandoned by the loyalist element of its mercantile elite and had attracted a group of merchants from lesser Massachusetts ports who built their success upon privateering. Exploiting their location north of the British blockade, and using specially designed ships, they directly preyed upon the enemy's commerce, established new trading relations with Holland, Spain, and France, and supplied the patriot army with munitions, stores, and clothing.

Between 1783 and the outbreak of the War of 1812, Boston underwent spurts of unprecedented growth. The population of the city proper, which had fallen to 10,000 in 1780 largely "owing to the loyalist exodus and the hardships of the war," surged to 18,320 in 1790, 24,973 in 1800, and 33,787 in 1810. During this period Boston captured a significant share of the lucrative international carrying trade and functioned as a key center of the country's foreign trade and coastwise commerce. Receipts at the city's custom house grew from about $450,000 in 1792 to $600,000 in 1793 and then to $1.25 million in 1795. After some levelling off, a previously unmatched increase occurred in shipping between 1798 and 1801. "Customs receipts more than doubled and in 1801 reached the huge total of more than two million dollars. Arrivals and clearances rose 85% over the 1798 level, and enrolled and registered tonnage increased from eighty thousand to ninety-seven thousand tons in the same period." Following a temporary decline, the maritime business of Boston boomed anew from 1804 to 1807. In 1804, when local customs officials collected well above $2.5 million, the value of Boston's exports surpassed the corresponding figure for New York. During the banner year of 1806, no fewer than 1,083 vessels sailed into Boston from foreign ports. By the following year the tonnage of shipping owned by Boston merchants was just short of 120,000 tons. Given Adam Seybert's estimate that "the American merchant marine in 1801 was earning at least forty dollars per ton annually," this means that the Boston fleet of 1807 was earning $6 million or more in freight tariffs alone. That impressive figure presumably rose between 1807 and 1810, for during the latter year registered and enrolled tonnage went over 149,000 tons and customs receipts took off again after an interlude of lively smuggling activity. As of 1810 Boston remained second in absolute trade importance to New York, but the relative role of foreign-oriented mercantile activities in Boston's economy and growth was unsurpassed. Exports per capita from the Massachusetts entrepôt were now 12%, 52%, and 93% greater than those from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, respectively. The years later conditions were radically altered, for the city's foreign trade had come to a virtual standstill. In 1813 only five American and thirty-seven neutral vessels departed Boston for foreign ports.

The economic and demographic expansion of Boston between the end of the Revolutionary War and the hostilities of 1812 occurred within the context of macro-structural constraints and enabling conditions generally known to students of American history. Every tile European power relations or the rules of international trade altered, the business prospects of Boston's merchants grew better worse.

A few highlights. In 1783 restrictive colonial trading rules were past matter; previously banned commercial relations with the Ori and other parts of the world were now possible. Instead, Boston ships, barques, and brigs were now excluded from the once high profitable trade with the British West Indies. In 1785, by which the post-war depression was deeply entrenched, the General Court of Massachusetts passed a discriminatory tariff against British import. Some of the first statutes enacted in 1789 and 1790 by the new federal government sought to encourage American shipping by placing differential duty on U.S. and foreign vessels, and by permitting duties to be refunded on goods reexported within a year.

In 1793 foreign commerce was greatly stimulated by the outbreak the Napoleonic Wars. "The immediate effect of the outbreak of war on American shipping, and particularly Boston shipping, was stimulate it by throwing open to neutral vessels the West Indian ports of the French and Spanish possessions." The West Indian trade was temporarily inhibited by British government action authorizing the seizure of all vessels carrying goods to or from French colonies. The Treaty, ratified by Congress in 1795, prohibited direct trade between the French West Indies and Europe but opened the British West Indies and East Indies to American vessels. In July 1796 "the French Directo announced to neutral nations that they might expect from France precisely the same sort of treatment that they received from England in corresponding situations." The act of Nisde, which went into effect in 1798 and was repealed one year later, opened American vessels further French attack by declaring "the nationality of a vessel to be determined by that of its cargo" and authorizing "the confiscation of vessel if any item on board, however insignificant, was of British origin." With the signing of a preliminary peace agreement between France and England in 1801, American merchants could no longer exploit Napoleon's blockade by replacing British carriers in the Continent trade with vessels of their own or vessels operated under Briti
license. With the resumption of war in 1803, the conditions for the flourishing of neutral trade were renewed through 1807, having been especially strengthened in 1806 by Napoleon’s imposition of the Continental System against all British commerce. During the 1802-1807 interval favorable trading circumstances were marred by the English blockade of Hamburg and Bremen, the French channel ports, and, eventually, every port from Brest to the mouth of the Elbe. The Essex decision handed down by an English court of admiralty also acted as an impediment. (This case in effect reversed previous decisions permitting the circuitous shipment of goods from the French West Indies via the United States.53) In 1807 a British Order of Council went into effect, banning neutral commerce with any power associated with Napoleon’s Continental System. In response to this, and to the British and French seizures of U.S. vessels, Congress passed the Embargo Act, which forbade any vessel of American registry to depart an American port for a foreign destination. The Non-Intercourse Act of 1809 eased the pressure on merchants somewhat by permitting commerce with all countries except France and Britain. Late in 1809 Napoleon ordered the confiscation of all American vessels in the Spanish ports under his control; and on March 23, 1810, he issued the Rambouillet Decree, which declared forfeit all American vessels which had entered any of his domains since May 20, 1809.54

Not long after Napoleon claimed to have revoked these steps, Congress passed a new Non-Intercourse Act in March 1811. This act was specifically aimed at the British and in effect made the United States virtually a part of the Continental System.55 Once the United States had declared war on Britain — following some unproductive diplomatic maneuverings, vessel seizures, and the impressment of American seamen — British warships and privateers almost totally froze the trade of Boston and other ports by initiating a blockade.

In the context of these and other macro-structural circumstances, how did the agency of local merchants contribute to the growth of Boston? Or, how did the practices of Boston’s merchant capitalists interpenetrate with the structuring of the wider political-economic environment and with local structuring processes? Or, yet otherwise, as structuring processes unfolded in Boston, how were merchant biographies formed by the dialectical interplay of long-term commitments and daily practices, and how did practice-based knowledge acquisition contribute to the definition and constitution of subsequently undertaken mercantile projects?

The time-space specifics and experienced details of biography formation were always unique to each merchant capitalist. All the same, with very few exceptions, the life path — daily path dialectics that were one with their socialization, formation of predispositions, and development of consciousness contained certain common elements that fell into one of three general patterns.

At least half of the merchant capitalists who significantly contributed to the growth of Boston were “sons of the counting house,” born into successful mercantile families who often had a tradition of maritime investment activity going back several generations, if not far back into the seventeenth century.56 (The deeply sedimented mercantile tradition of some of these families went back to pre-emigration ancestors who had conducted their business from London.)57 As children participating in household projects they were frequently exposed to an ideology that emphasized those pillars of the “Protestant” or “bourgeois ethic” — “diligence, energy, order [and neatness], thrift, prudence, personal restraint, and self-improvement.”58 Whether of Puritan or Anglican stock, and whether their parents were long-standing Boston residents or mercantile émigrés from Salem and other Essex County ports, these children had the merits of commercial activity, the profit motive, and conspicuous consumption repeatedly impressed upon them.59 For most of this group, attendance by the age of seven at the Latin School or some other “good academy” was taken for granted.60 There the educational projects that dominated their daily lives helped shape the competencies and predispositions necessary to enter Harvard. And the tracing out of daily paths at Harvard enabled the budding merchants to form or cement social connections that could prove pivotal to the conduct of specific business projects in the future.

Having decided at Harvard — or earlier — to pursue a mercantile career, each member of this group normally served a brief apprenticeship in the counting house of his father, his brother, or some other prominent merchant. Some more resolute individuals, who had earlier rejected the legal profession or other options open to the elite, moved directly from the academy to a lengthier counting-house apprenticeship.61 Participation in the letter transcription, bookkeeping, and other routine projects of the counting house afforded an opportunity to absorb essential knowledge, rules pertaining to capital circulation and other forms of commercial behavior, and time-tested strategies for dealing in staples and luxury goods. It was through bringing his path into conjunction with these place-specific projects that the up-and-coming merchant capitalist acquired the
intricate know-how required to make sales on credit, to handle the various instruments of credit, to distribute profits among partners, to operate on commission, to set buying and selling prices, to charter vessels, to make insurance arrangements, and to calculate costs, exchange rates, weight and measure conversions, or simple and compound interest. If the individuals in question did not do so immediately after graduating from Harvard, they took on the position of supercargo upon completion of their counting-house apprenticeship. To act as supercargo on a Boston trading vessel was to act as a mercantile journeyman, as one required to accumulate decision-making experiences and take on money-handling responsibilities that were vital to one's eventual performance as a merchant capitalist. "A supercargo was the representative on shipboard of owners and consigners. He took no part in navigation, but handled the business side of the voyage." He was given careful instruction as to the prices at which to buy and sell, what goods he was to purchase, and where; but he was allowed a good deal of discretion, particularly on the latter two points. He was expected to sell unused space on his own vessel and to rent space to another if capacity was exhausted by large purchases. He had to negotiate bills of exchange, make loans when necessary, and constantly supply his Boston employees with information. If he was sailing to the Orient, he not only had "to dicker for the sale of the outward cargo" but also to develop "an encyclopedic knowledge of all the grades and varieties of Chinese teas or Bengal cottons and indigo, to say nothing of keeping in his mind and memorandum book the fluctuations, past and prospective, of the market for each, as affected by events in Europe, the Americas, and the Orient." The familiarity they acquired with the workings of particular distant markets and the practices of particular foreign middlemen often predisposed supercargoes to make specific investment choices in their subsequent merchant-capitalist roles.

Once a well-born supercargo graduated to the position of Boston-based merchant, his future success and biographic details could depend greatly on the nature of his past associations with near and distant relatives. If he did not go into partnership with a father, brother, or uncle, there were many other ways "in which his older and better-established relatives could, and were expected to, assist him." These ranged "from mere acts of commercial courtesy, such as receiving and making payments or negotiating insurance for a relative, turning over to him letters which related to types of business in which the original recipient was not engaged, etc., up to actually lending him money." If he married the daughter or sister of another merchant, as was often the case owing to early-life social encounters, previous business contacts of a secondary importance were apt to assume the dimensions of major cooperation. Relatives could prove useful in other direct or indirect ways if they were either connected to one of the city's banks or held public office. (Prominent merchants and their offspring, in an effort to cope with business-affecting macro-structural circumstances, came to play a leading role in local politics — where matters such as shipping regulations, tax assessments and trade licenses were dealt with — and in state government. They also came to occupy positions of influence at the national level, where, like other Federalists, they favored the stabilization of business conditions, the protection of commercial and shipping property, and the promotion of foreign trade.)

A second smaller group that held the power to define mercantile investment projects and influence the growth of Boston came from somewhat more inauspicious beginnings but benefitted from family connections. These were merchant capitalists whose fathers had been ministers, retailers, or master artisans but whose brothers-in-law, cousins or more removed kin had run an overseas trading house. Owing to their socialization, relatives who opened the gate took it for granted that in the formation of all personal business relationships one was "bound not to go outside [one's] circle of kinship so long as there was in it any one desirous of employment." In some cases these merchant capitalists had been forced to start as mere foremast hands on kin-owned ships before being permitted to advance. Others were given their first preparatory experiences in the counting house. But for most of them, promotion to the position of supercargo was essential to their eventual ascendance to mercantile independence. The role of supercargo carried with it opportunities as well as heavy responsibilities. As part of his compensation, the supercargo was "privileged" to occupy several tons of freight-free space on the homeward voyage. He usually was also given a "primage," or commission, of a few percentage points on completed sales. It was through these conventions that the supercargo, or shipmaster-supercargo, could amass the resources (as well as the knowledge) necessary to set himself up as a port-bought merchant and accumulator of capital. Moreover, supercargoes acting without immediate supervision several thousand miles from home port could easily amplify their income by deceiving their employers in a variety of ways. However, it was a fear of such deception that led to the employment of duty-bound, more distant relatives when immediate family members were not available to serve on an owned or chartered vessel. Although friendships and class interest created some "spirit of cooperation," established houses often mistrusted each other in an environment where it was not unusual to dupe buyers, sell spoiled goods, or spread false rumors in order to buy low or sell high. Although relatives could prove inexperienced, negligent, or gullible and personally create unnecessary losses, they were preferred as
supercargoes "to an agent whose greater ability might find improper expression and who would not be inhibited by the fear of family ostracism."75

There was a third, even smaller group of individuals who contributed to the growth of Boston through their mercantile investment projects. These individuals did so after having made their way up from relatively humble backgrounds without family assistance. These were successful men of commerce who had gone to sea as cabin boys or deckhands, progressed through various grades to supercargo (or captain), and saved enough from their privileges and impositions to eventually underwrite trading ventures of their own. Early-life daily experiences had somehow predisposed these people to leave their farms, villages, or small towns for the sea when confronted by an uncertain future and low wages on land.76 Daily paths associated with household or school roles had equipped them with the competency to deal with numbers and, for whatever reasons, had inclined them as common seamen to hang around the supercargoes or shipmasters from whom they could learn so much.

**Knowledge acquisition**

The acquisition of specialized reliable knowledge was central to the repeated overcoming of Boston's situational shortcomings and to the further accumulation of capital under whatever macro-structural conditions prevailed for the moment. In order to define long-distance importing or exporting projects, in order to initiate investments of a mercantile (or non-mercantile) nature, and in order to conduct the component tasks of their activities, merchant capitalists required particular forms of knowledge. The acquisition of that knowledge was synonymous with a ceaseless struggle against the obstacle of great spatial-temporal separation; for throughout the period in question, information could be moved across the seas and over substantial land distances only at painfully slow speeds involving many days, several weeks, or months.77

If new mercantile projects depended on knowledge, then mercantile knowledge depended on ongoing activities and previously established practices. The merchant capitalist's most important source of knowledge usually was the correspondence he received from supercargoes, captains, representatives periodically dispatched to Europe or elsewhere, and the merchants based in foreign or domestic ports who acted as commission agents, purchasing or selling on his behalf. Anxiously awaited letters, which often ran on at great length, contained a rich variety of extremely detailed information. An extensive sample of Boston correspondence from the post-Revolutionary

War decades refers to such matters as sale prospects; prices obtained on goods sold; current prices, their advancing or falling trends, and their anticipated future levels; purchasing possibilities and instructions; consignments made to various ports; manufactured goods being sent on consignment by British merchants; speculative options in London and elsewhere; the quantities and qualities of goods currently available in Calcutta, Madras, Canton, and a host of less exotic ports; the discouragement of immediate shipments; contacts made with commission agents; altered commission-arrangements; news of mercantile failures; joint ventures to be entered into with New York or Philadelphia merchants; insurance rates and terms; prospective voyages; terms of freight; news of political developments, foreign treaties, and trade restrictions; difficulties of conducting business at specific foreign locations; coping suggestions; revised cargo proposals; shipping arrivals and departures at other ports; seamen's wages; packing instructions; cargo invoices; vessel chartering possibilities; the remission of funds to Boston; the payment of outstanding notes; discount rates for cash; credit arrangements; and exchange-rate fluctuations.78

Confidential correspondence arrived sporadically. Some letters of foreign origin never arrived at all because a captain willing to convey them could not be found. Others were received only after they had been exposed to the prying eyes of a captain or other intermediary who could not resist the temptation of potentially profitable information.79 Merchant capitalists were therefore forced to supplement their knowledge with the more public information available in the local and non-local press. Newspapers could be counted on to provide a large volume of "European Intelligence" that was frequently pregnant with trading implications as well as numerous advertisements pertaining to goods availability, new business partnerships, cargo space, vessel departures, and other matters of interest to wholesale exporters and importers.80 Newspapers also regularly contained information regarding port destinations, vessel arrivals, and other shipping intelligence, in addition to wholesale price lists and commercial statistics from distant points and the Boston area. (The *Boston Price-Current and Marine Intelligence*, which first appeared in 1795, was particularly devoted to the latter matters.) Given the concerns of the mercantile elite, "Boston newspapers frequently issued extras when some ships arrived with news of late [European] developments."81

Finally, and not least importantly, the definition and execution of mercantile projects depended on verbal messages carried by captains, super-cargoes, or business partners returning from Europe, the West Indies, other U.S. ports, or the Orient. Such information, as well as that contained in letters or newspapers, also could be obtained
Indirectly through personal conversations with one's friends or relations.

The written, printed, and spoken knowledge which enabled Boston's merchant capitalists to exercise and solidify their power was not procured in a vacuum. It was acquired through participation in every day material, economic, and social life - through the intersection of daily paths and institutional projects which was one with local structuring processes and with the becoming of Boston as a place, with the constant reproduction and transformation of Boston.

Depending on the time of year and whether or not he had any pressing business, the daily path of a typical Boston merchant capitalist began when he arose somewhere between 6:00 and 8:00 a.m. at his Bowdoin Square, Beacon Hill, or South End residence. He was either first attended by a black barber who served several households, or, clad in "China silk dressing gown and cap," presented himself directly to his family who joined him in short "prayers and a hearty breakfast by a blazing hickory fire." After taking ample time to meticulously attire himself in a long-lapel cravat, linen drawers, gartered silk stockings, nankeen breeches, a low-hung waistcoat, and a broad-skirted coat, he left the house, accompanied by a basket-carrying servant to amble by foot to the neighborhood of Faneuil Hall (Figure 2.1) in order to purchase the day's dinner ingredients. The custom that required well-off townsfolk to make daily purchases of fish, poultry, game, meat, cheeses, fruits, and vegetables provided merchants with their first opportunity of the day to casually exchange commerce-related information. Having tarried and chatted among the market stalls with friends, relatives, and acquaintances for a good while, the businessman dispatched his servant homeward and continued onward to State Street, Long Wharf, or India Wharf, arriving at his counting house some time between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. Much of the next three or four hours were spent reading or drafting correspondence, giving letter-copying assignments to his clerks, making up accounts and checking on bookkeeping minutiae with his chief clerk, reaching credit or payment agreements with his borrowers or lenders, or managing his estate affairs, arranging for the assembly of cargoes and the disposal of received shipments or merchandise consignments, discussing plans with a master shipbuilder, or seeing to a variety of other administrative matters. If any slack arose during this interval, he might put aside the stiff Jamaican rum drink mixed by his chief clerk and briefly step out to a nearby coffee house or tavern. Once within those confines he either conversed with a few of his confrères or perused some of the local and non-local newspapers kept on hand there.

At approximately one o'clock, the merchant capitalist abandoned

![Diagram](image-url)

Figure 2.1: Daily path of a "typical" Boston merchant capitalist

There are two things to be noted in reading this figure. First, each point on the bottom street-map plane is equidistant (3.5 inches) from the corresponding point on the top plane. Second, along the vertical line connecting any two corresponding points each .44 inches represents three hours. Thus, the time scales at the two most outermost edges hold only for the corresponding perimeter points that they connect, and one must imagine a separate time-scale line connecting each of the six locations visited.

Legend: (1) home; (2) Faneuil Hall; (3) counting-house; (4) coffee house; (5) change on State Street; and (6) club-meeting site.
the counting house to congregate under the covered walkway of the Old State House or some other part of State Street, where the long-standing custom of 'Change (exchange) was perpetuated. There, weather permitting, all of the city's mercantile capitalists freely mingled with one another to informally conduct business, and "to talk shop, ships, and politics for [at least] a half-hour or so."87 (Under forbidding weather conditions, the ritualized exchange of information occurred in taverns.) Thereafter the merchant strolled back to his home. Around two-thirty it was time for dinner. Often he was joined not only by his immediate family but also by some fellow merchants and other (most likely related) members of the local elite. Following a feast that included several substantial courses and a goodly amount of drink, the women would retire into another room, while commercially relevant political gossip and other conversation was prolonged into candlelight over port and brandy. If dinner was less formal and did not require "drinking the afternoon into oblivion," it might be followed by a return visit to the counting house at about four o'clock, an undisturbed hour of newspaper and book reading in the library, some dozing, or a family coach- or sleigh-ride.88

The evening also provided opportunities for the acquisition of specialized knowledge. One might go off to one of the numerous "small gentlemen's clubs, which met at each others' houses or at taverns, for evening talk and cheer."89 Or, if one did not attend a supper party or ball with kin and Harvard or academy chums, one might show up at a session of the Boston Chamber of Commerce or the Boston Marine Society (the "common ground where all Bostonians interested in seaborne commerce met"), or perhaps at the reading room of the Academy of Arts and Sciences.90 Finally, when returning home for bed — or at other times of the day — some exploitable morsel of information might be picked up through a chance street encounter in the narrowly defined neighborhood within which the merchant capitalist dwelt.

Thus, whatever distrust may have existed among some rival mercantile houses, shared daily path elements and repeated interactions at Faneuil Hall, coffee house, 'Change, dinners and clubs facilitated the acquisition of the more or less confidential knowledge necessary to the definition and execution of mercantile projects. Moreover, the daily reproduction of these institutionalized forms of "sociability"91 resulted in the personal accumulation of common knowledge, or in a deepening of collective consciousness, and in a further entrenchment of the basic stances of Federalist ideology: "Distaste for popular rule, distrust of the lower state and national houses as nests of unrestrained democracy, support for the judiciary as a bastion against the threat of the impoverished multitude, suspicion of

abstract philosophies of reform, belief that men were driven primarily by material self-interest, and the conviction that the main purpose of government lay in protecting property and promoting business."92 In short, the knowledge exchange and social interaction associated with shared daily path elements ensured some kind of political mobilization whenever local or wider developments threatened mercantile class interests. Mobilization, in turn, could help produce a restructuring of explicit rules at the local, state or national level.

The China trade and Thomas Perkins

The influence of agency upon port growth under already structured circumstances, and in the context of previous biography formation and knowledge acquisition, is perhaps best illustrated by a transition from the general to the particular.

The development of the China trade was one major way in which Boston-based merchant capitalists surmounted situational limitations and periodic macro-structural foreign-shipping obstacles to spur the growth of their city.

In the fall of 1787 a Boston-owned vessel set out on a voyage to Canton for the first time. Nineteen years later, Boston-dominated American shipping sold goods worth more than $5.3 million to Cantonese merchants and returned with teas, nankeens, silks, and other merchandise with a value in excess of $5.1 million.93 The round-trip voyages, frequently of three years' duration, were fraught with risk. All the same, there were enormous profits to be made, if all went right, despite the heavy expenses incurred by the provision of commissions, duties, presents, and draft to the Chinese. Cheaply purchased items could be sold at many times their cost in Canton, while goods acquired for less than $157,000 in that city could be wholesaled for more than $261,000 in Boston — from whence they were largely reexported to Mediterranean ports and other points throughout the world — thus yielding a net single-voyage profit of close to $207,000.94 Such handsome returns provided capital that could be applied to "the future of the [China] trade" itself,95 to the underwriting of other mercantile ventures, and to investment in real estate, local infrastructure, and manufacturing activities. Successful China voyages also sent a ripple of primary multiplier effects through Boston's counting houses, insurance offices, banks, docks, shipyards, rope-walks, cooperages, and printing establishments. The city's various shops, market stalls, and artisans, in turn, benefitted from a succession of secondary multiplier effects.

Boston's supremacy in the China trade stemmed principally from the incorporation of a third exchange component — trade with the
Indians of the Pacific Northwest Coast. The New York, Philadelphia, and Salem interests who initially opened the trade with Cantonese merchants had based their efforts mainly on the sale of ginseng roots, which grew wildly in New England and New York and were prized by the Chinese for their supposed healing qualities. From the initial 1787 voyage of the Columbia onward, Boston merchant capitalists instead built their trading strategy largely on the sale of sea-otter skins and other peltry. These, in turn, were obtained from tribal groups along the coastline of what is now Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia in return for pieces of copper, rough iron chisels, cheaply wrought necklaces, coarse clothing, blankets, and other extremely low-cost items.

Two sets of biography-formation and knowledge links were apparently critical to the Northwest Coast strategy and eventual preeminence in the China trade. Some of those backing the Columbia were closely familiar with Samuel Shaw, who had left a counting-house position in his native Boston to serve in the Revolution, acted as a supercargo on a New York-financed voyage to China in 1783, and had been sent back to Canton as U.S. consul in 1786. Shaw, who handled the Columbia’s cargo and received a commission on its return lading, appears to have informed his Boston associates of previous English sales of Alaskan sea-otters at Canton, and of the inability of Russian hunters to meet the Chinese demand for such furs. These same initial investors had been personally urged to undertake an experimental venture to Canton via the Northwest Coast by John Ledyard, an American seaman who had served on Captain Cook’s third voyage and had published a journal recounting his travels in 1783. (There he had told of “the great wealth of furs to be found in the Northwest and of the excitement of his fellow seamen when they found in Canton that ‘skins which did not cost the purchaser sixpence sterling, sold in China for one hundred dollars.’”) The Boston merchant capitalists in question at first ignored Ledyard’s advice, much like their personally approached counterparts in New York, Philadelphia, London, and Paris. However, for undocumented reasons, they were predisposed to reconsider Ledyard’s suggestion once confirming evidence was provided by the publication of Cook’s own journals and the acquisition of Shaw’s reports.

Practice-based knowledge of another sort contributed to the cornering of the China trade by Boston commercial actors. Before the Columbia returned, a second group of Boston merchants sought to enter the Cantonese market by imitating the large-vessel strategy employed by the British East India Company. Using their own funds, as well as capital supplied by Samuel Shaw, they built the 800-ton Massachusetts, then the largest ship ever constructed in an American shipyard. In the spring of 1790 the vessel was dispatched to Batavia with orders to exchange for goods appropriate to the Cantonese market. “But the Dutch authorities . . . refused a permit. When the Massachusetts arrived at Canton with an unsalable cargo, after a long and tempestuous voyage, Samuel Shaw gladly seized an opportunity to sell her for $65,000 to the Danish East India Company. This experience (in combination with knowledge of the Columbia’s success) determined the merchants of Boston to concentrate on the Northwest fur trade and, in so doing, to confine themselves to smaller, less risky, swiftly moving vessels averaging about 200 tons burthen.

Through his investments and project definitions Thomas Hardasyd Perkins accumulated more capital from the China trade than anybody else and thereby acted as a significant contributor to Boston’s growth. The bare essentials of Perkins’s background and involvement in the China trade clearly reflect the manner in which long-term role commitments and daily-path content could be dialectically interwoven within a multi-layered tapestry of enabling and constraining structural conditions.

Perkins was born in 1764 into a merchant family with a fur-dealing tradition. His mother, who was the key figure in the daily socialization of his childhood, was a strong and able person who successfully conducted the family business following the death of his father in 1771. While attending school in Barnstable during the temporary occupation of Boston by British troops, Perkins befriended Harrison Gray Otis, thereby establishing life-long connections with an extremely wealthy mercantile clan and a person who was to become a highly influential lawyer and politician. Although Perkins received three years of preparatory training for Harvard, he decided to enter directly into a counting-house apprenticeship, apparently motivated by a desire to relieve his mother of some of her financial responsibilities. After leaving his counting-house post in 1785, he acquired further commercial experience by joining one of his brothers in a commission house on Santo Domingo to deal in commodities as well as the slave trade. Finding the climate disagreeable, he returned to Boston to attend to the U.S. end of business. There, in 1788, he wed the daughter of a neighbor whom he had met on his daily rounds. The marriage brought him into contact with James Magee, his wife’s uncle and an experienced sea captain. When Magee was offered the opportunity to captain a vessel to Batavia and Canton for a prosperous Salem merchant, he selected his niece’s husband to serve as supercargo on the voyage, which commenced in early 1789.

While in Canton for a period of several months selling the ship’s goods and acquiring a return cargo, Perkins gained the confidence of a leading Hong merchant with whom he was later to deal over a number
of years. During his stay, the *Columbia* arrived, and through this incident and his everyday activities, Perkins stockpiled a fund of knowledge regarding Cantonese trading possibilities in general and the value of sea-otter skins and other furs in particular. Before departing, Perkins and Magee apparently reached an agreement with the first mate of the *Columbia* by which the latter would captain a vessel to the Northwest Coast and Canton as soon as they all returned safely to Boston. Using their respectively earned commissions and the backing of others, they purchased a briggantine in the fall of 1790, put it under the command of the *Columbia’s* first mate, and organized the construction of a second vessel that, one year later, went off with Magee at the helm.

The first ship did not do as well as expected, but Magee arranged for a profit in the vicinity of half a million dollars on the disposal of 12,000 to 15,000 sea-otter skins and a considerable additional profit on the sale of Chinese goods upon returning to Boston. This fortune served as the foundation on which Perkins eventually expanded his involvement in the China trade — in part by dealing in Turkish opium through a loyalist relative who had exiled himself to Smyrna, and in part by establishing a permanent mercantile house in Canton that constantly furnished knowledge regarding the potential for new investment projects. The fortune also provided the means by which he further stimulated the Boston economy through speculating in European trade during the parade of macro-structural changes associated with the Napoleonic Wars. By 1794 Perkins’s capital and knowledge sources for specific ventures were compounded by the partnership forged between one of his brothers and the long-prominent Higginsons, as well as by the marriage of his eldest sister into a sea captain’s family. Perkins’s position of power as a merchant capitalist, and his access to commercially exploitable knowledge, was eventually further strengthened by, among other things, his appointment to the presidency of the Boston branch of the Bank of the United States and his subsequent election, in 1805, to the Massachusetts State Senate.

Résumé and Reservations

The supremacy of Boston in the China trade and its overall growth between 1783 and 1812, while not pregiven or inevitable, were very much affected by the initiative and agency of specific merchant capitalists. However, even power holders and influential figures such as Perkins did not produce the history and place of Boston under conditions of their own choosing. They were born into, and socialized within, an already existing local social structure. They were trained and acquired knowledge through participation in already existing institutions whose practices and conventions were sedimented from the past. Their international trading maneuvers were always subject to macro-structurally produced rules of behavior and power relations as well as the prices resulting from the structured circumstances of everyday material and economic life in other geographical areas. None of them exerted agency in a vacuum or operated as a sort of *deus ex machina*. Their mercantile projects were always part of the dialectics of agency and structure that were played out simultaneously at several different processual levels.

This sketchy portrayal of Boston is only meant to suggest how human agency can be introduced to the scholarly consideration of mercantile-period port development without resorting to naive idealism or voluntarism. It is also meant to illustrate but one of several possible ways in which the theory of local and regional transformation as a historically contingent process may inform empirical inquiries into real situations in specific geographic areas. A more finely textured treatment of the development of Boston or any other port would have to much more thoroughly document the details of biography formation and knowledge acquisition. It also would have to either more systematically examine the various interpenetrating structuring processes implicit in the writings of Braudel, or consider other questions informed by the theory of local and regional transformation as a historically contingent process.

Points of Return: Becoming Into Port

While structure became agency as agency became structure, while practice became knowledge as knowledge became practice, mercantile port-places with their social and spatial structures produced biographies, as unfolding biographies with their underlying dialectics produced mercantile port-places.
All this occurring uninterruptedly in time-space through the intersection of paths and projects.

All this in ways that were ever contingent upon coexisting, encroaching, and interpenetrating macro-structural processes, upon the sedimentation of past local history. All this in ways whose details were unique to each port-place.

Notes

3Braudel (1977), 41.
4Braudel (1975), xii; and (1977), 62.
5Braudel (1972-1973), I, 50; and (1982a), 23.
6Braudel (1977), 50.
7Braudel (1982a), 562.
8Braudel (1975), xliii.
9Braudel (1977), 113.
10Braudel (1977) 62; and (1982a), 562.
12Braudel (1977), 58. As Charles Tilly has observed in an extended assessment of Braudel, this exchange-oriented definition of capitalism "abandons the relations of production entirely." In taking this position Braudel "has thus aligned himself... with Immanuel Wallerstein and André Gunder Frank, and separated himself from analysts such as Robert Brenner and Witold Kula" (Tilly [1984], 389, 388).
13Braudel (1972-1973), I, 20; and Braudel (1980), 74.
15Braudel (1972-1973), II, 901.
16Braudel (1972-1973), II, 899.
17Cf. the the discussion of the concept of "locales" developed by Anthony Giddens, p. 22 in this volume. Also note Thrift (1983), 40.

Spatial structure, it is to be recalled, may be defined as those elements physically built into a given geographical area through human activity, plus the relative location of those elements to one another.

Note the discussion regarding the southern Swedish ports of Malmö, Ystad, Landskrona, and Simrishamn in Pred (1986).

28Braudel (1982b), 402.
30Although there are a considerable number of authors who may be directly or indirectly linked to the discourse of structuring theory, I had the following set of works most particularly in mind when making my distillation of views: Berger and Luckmann (1967); Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984); Kosic (1976); Bourdieu (1977); Touraine (1977); Bhaskar (1978, 1979); Layder (1981); Abrams (1982); and Callinicos (1988). Also note the lucid Introduction in Gregory (1982) and the important summary and arguments presented by Thrift (1983).
31Giddens (1979), 129.
32Cf. Note 34 in Chapter 1 of this volume.
33As Thrift has suggested repeatedly (e.g., 1973, 44-46; 1985), at a particular time there are at least five interrelated types of unknowing that can simultaneously exist and be socially distributed in a place: (1) The "unknown, and not possible to know, in terms of being totally unknown" to all or some local inhabitants; (2) the "not understood" in terms of "not being within the frame of meaning" of all or certain local inhabitants; (3) the "hidden in terms of being hidden from certain" local inhabitants; (4) the "undisclosed, in terms of being taken for granted as 'true' or 'natural'" by all or some local groups; and (5) the "distorted, in terms of being known only in a distorted fashion" by all or certain members of the local population.
34Once a person makes a commitment to participate in any project at a given time and site, it becomes impossible for her (1) to simultaneously do something else somewhere; (2) to join any other spatially separate project that starts at another time but temporally overlaps with some portion of the project in question; or (3) to join another project that presents no simultaneity conflicts but is out of "reach" because of travel-time requirements. The unfamiliar will find that these time-geographic constraints are more readily understandable.
when diagrammatically depicted, as in the references of Note 33 in Chapter 1 of this volume.

35* Cf. Note 34, above.

36* Morison (1961), 12.

37* Schlesinger (1968), 27.

38* Schlesinger (1968), 24.


40* Taylor (1967), 40. If one includes Charlestown, Roxbury, Dorchester, Cambridge, and other lesser contiguous towns with which Boston was physically and functionally integrated, the population of that city had reached 49,654 by 1810.

41* Forbes (1938), 715-716.

42* Forbes (1938), 718-719.

43* Forbes (1938), 720; and Gregory (1976), 13.

44* Morison (1961), 225.

45* Morison (1961), 398.

46* Morison (1961), 189.

47* Morison (1961), 398; Forbes (1938), 724-725; and Gregory (1976), 14.

48* Derived from Bjork (1967), 56. These percentages are based on population figures which included contiguous towns, and on export values deflated by the Warren Pearson Wholesale Commodity Index with 1790 = 100.

49* Morison (1961), 205.

50* Forbes (1938), 712.

51* Forbes (1938), 717.

52* Forbes (1938), 717.

53* Forbes (1938), 720.

54* Forbes (1938), 725.

55* Forbes (1938), 726.

56* Jaher (1982), 20; and Porter (1937), I, 6.


59* As one prominent Boston member of the U.S. House of Representatives put it in 1812: "The occupation [of merchant capitalist was] rendered ideal and venerable by all the cherished associations of our infancy and all the sage and prudential maxims of our ancestors" (quoted in Jaher [1982], 370). Jaher cites a wide assortment of personal papers and correspondence testifying to this type of ideology formation.

60* Morison (1913), I, 6-8, 20; and Porter (1937), I, 8.

61* Porter (1937), I, 7, 10.


63* Morison (1961), 45.

64* Porter (1937), 47.

65* Porter (1937), I, 81. Because of this complexity and diversity of duties, most Boston merchants had separated the responsibilities of the supercargo from those of the captain.

66* Porter (1937), I, 93.

67* Porter (1937), I, 97; Morison (1913), I, 4; and Lodge (1878), 11.

68* The Massachusetts First National Bank of Boston was organized in 1784 by members of the city's leading mercantile families, the so-called "brahmns." "The National Union Bank (1792), the Old Boston Bank (1804), the State National Bank of Boston of 1811... and the Boston branches of the first (1792) and second Bank of the United States (1816) [also] were organized, officered, and owned chiefly by Brahmin merchants or their kin" (Jaher [1982], 24-25).

69* During the post-Revolutionary period "the Boston political and economic elites merged, and government service advanced class power as well as class or individual honor" (Jaher [1982], 26). With Boston mercantile representatives serving as Alexander Hamilton's "privy council," no "section or interest in the United States was so favored by Washington's and Adams' administrations as maritime Massachusetts" (Morison [1961], 165-167).

70* Porter (1937), I, p 88-89.

71* Porter (1937), I, 9, 47, 50, 82-83; and Morison (1961), 77.

72* Jaher (1982), 39.

73* Gregory (1976), 17.

74* Porter (1937), I, 98-110.

75* Porter (1937), I, 92-100.

76* Porter (1937), I, 9-10, 97; and Morison (1961), 111-112.


78* Letters associated with Boston mercantile houses were reproduced in Porter (1937), I, 346-368, 473-548, 592-766, and II, 773-1173; and in Cary (1856), 267-304. Cf. the comments on the pre-Revolutionary correspondence of Boston merchants in Baxter (1945), 195-197; and the more general observations in Braudel (1982b), 409-411.

79* Porter (1937), I, 67-68; and Gregory (1976), 27.

80* Privately printed circulars occasionally served the same advertising functions as newspapers (Seaburg and Paterson (1971), 102, 97).

81* Seaburg and Paterson (1971), 102.

82* Kirker and Kirker (1964), 137; and Morison (1961), 130. In an extreme case, the Kirkers refer to one merchant who was up between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. during the summer.

83* Morison (1961), 130.


85* Clerks sometimes made more than one clean copy of a letter. "In the case of foreign letters, a copy was also made in the letter book. When there was risk of
loss at sea, one or more extra copies might be sent later; the delay was often used to add further paragraphs" (Baxter [1945], 196).

Porter (1937), I, 5; Seaburg and Paterson (1971), 96-97; Morison (1961), 131; and Gregory (1976), 20, 116, 137. For a general discussion of some of the major concerns and transactions associated with counting-house activity, see Buck (1925).

Morison (1961), 131). Also note Baxter (1945), 184, on the mid-eighteenth century occurrence of "change. Exchange was still held out in the street throughout this period, despite the construction in 1808 of the seven-story Boston Exchange Coffee House, which was "designed to reform this ancient custom" (Kirk and Kirk [1964], 131).

Morison (1961), 131-132; Baxter (1945), 184; Seaburg and Paterson (1971), 98; and Kirk and Kirk (1964), 139.

Morison (1961), 132.

In addition to sponsoring literary activities, the Academy of Arts and Sciences "established a reading room which [in 1807] developed into the Athenaeum. . . . Organized for literary purposes and commercial information, the Athenaeum served both the economic and cultural needs of the patriciate" (Jaher [1982], 35).

Jaher (1982), 40-41.

Dulles (1930), 210.

Dulles (1930), 57-58; and Morison (1961), 66-71. Also note the 1814 figures given in Cary (1856), 295.

Contemporary letter quoted in East (1938), 257.

Dulles (1930), 54-56; and Morison (1961), 56-58. The three-cornered trade with Canton and the Northwest Coast also included a call at what are now the Hawaiian Islands in order to provision and to take on a supplementary cargo of sandalwood. If the return voyage did not involve circumnavigation, stops were usually made at various Central and South American ports as well as at islands in the Pacific. "Unless exceedingly lucky, (Boston) vessels remained eighteen months to two years on the [Northwest] Coast before proceeding to Canton. . . . Small brigs and sloops were sent out, or built on, the Coast, to continue the collection of furs during the absence of the larger vessel" (Morison [1961], 59). Between about 1790 and 1812 there also was some trade with Canton based on sealskins obtained from the South Atlantic and South Pacific.

That the Northwest Coast strategy was particularly Bostonian in character before 1812 is suggested by the following observation: "From 1790 to 1812 there were one hundred and eight American vessels on the Coast as compared with twenty-two from England, and in a list in which the names of sixty-three of these ships are given, fifty-three prove to be from Boston" (Dulles [1930], 55).

Dulles (1930), 7, 26-27;shaw (1847); and Morison (1961), 52.

Dulles (1930), 51.

Dulles (1930), 51-53; and Sparks (1848), especially 173-176.

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Morison (1961), 52.

Biographic details extracted from Cary (1856) and from Seaburg and Paterson (1971).

Cf. the more general and somewhat differently oriented argument regarding the joint study of biography, social structure, and history in Sartre (1968); Verhaeghen (1974); and Beriaux (1981). Also note the literature review by Tilly (1983).

Bibliography


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