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CHAPTER

2

Urban Life in Colonial America



Although the native peoples who inhabited North America before the seventeenth century built important urban communities that exerted considerable influence over broad hinterlands, the various cities founded by European colonists on the Atlantic coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contained the most fertile seeds of American urban development. The European settlers were urban-minded people to whom civilization and city were equivalent. It was no accident, then, that they tried to transfer urban forms and urban culture from the Old World as soon as they reached the New. With their eye on profits from commerce and land speculation, the early settlers gave prime importance to their cities as places where goods and communications were accumulated and distributed. The five largest colonial settlements—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Newport, and Charleston—were “cities in the wilderness,” places that contained societies and an economic organization different from those of rural communities. Further, they spawned several secondary cities—Albany, Providence, Baltimore, and New Haven—that adopted similar characteristics. Just what those characteristics were and how they were reflected in urban organization form the themes of this chapter.

✧ DOCUMENTS

These documents present several perspectives on city growth during the colonial era. The first selection, from an admirer of William Penn, the founder of Philadelphia, was meant to advertise Philadelphia to Europeans in the 1690s; it therefore contains many exaggerations, including a vast overestimation of the city's population. Yet the account provides a telling glimpse of colonial Americans' expectations of their cities. The second document is a treatise in defense of slavery, but it also shows how some colonials viewed their society as organized according to rigid and unchangeable social ranks. The third document features entries from the diary of James Allen, a prominent Philadelphia attorney. Although much of the diary pertains to Allen's cautiously pro-American stance during the American

Revolution, the excerpts here illustrate the importance of face-to-face relationships in the colonial urban world. The fourth document, a statement from William Penn, shows that the promise of profits from real-estate investment already was a driving force behind American urbanization. The fifth document presents travel notes of the Swedish observer Peter Kalm, who emphasizes here the commercial ascendancy of New York City in the 1740s, a predominance that would help it become the leading American port in the early nineteenth century. The final document shows the inner workings of a colonial urban government, that of Albany, New York, in the 1750s. These excerpts from the town-council meetings provoke questions about what exactly were the responsibilities of government in a city's—and the nation's—formative stages.

Gabriel Thomas Promotes Early Philadelphia, 1698

[The region of Pennsylvania] remain'd with very little improvement till the year 1681, in which William Penn Esq; had the Country given him by King Charles the Second, in lieu of Money that was due to (and signed Service done by) his Father, Sir William Penn, and from him bore the Name of Pensilvania.

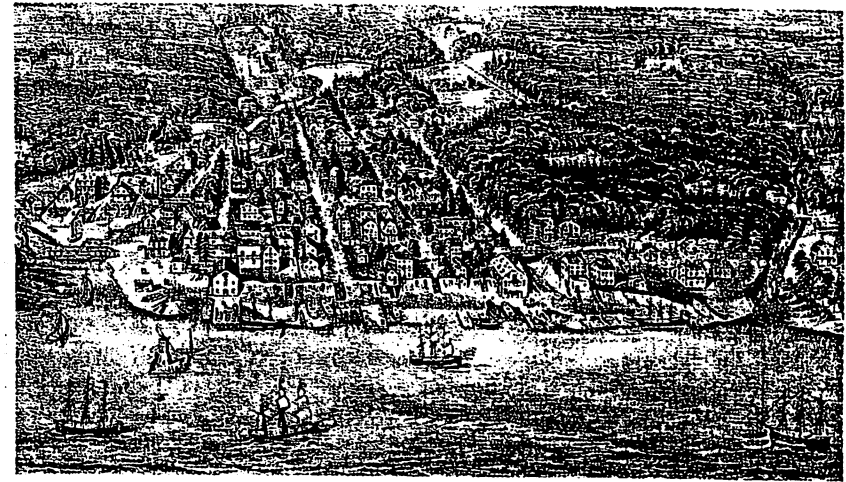
Since that time, the Industrious (nay Indefatigable) Inhabitants have built a Noble and Beautiful City, and called it Philadelphia, which contains above two thousand Homes, all Inhabited, and most of them Stately, and of Brick, generally three Stories high, after the Mode in London, and as many several Families in each. There are very many Lanes and Alleys, as first, Huttons-Lane, Morris-Lane, Jones's-Lane, wherein are very good Buildings, Shorters-Alley, and Flowers-Alley. All these Alleys and Lanes extend from the Front Street to the Second Street. There is another Alley in the Second Street, called Carters-Alley. There are also besides these Alleys and Lanes, several fine Squares and Courts within this Magnificent City, (for so I may justly call it). As for the particular Names of the several Streets contained therein, the Principal are as follows, viz, Walnut-Street, Vine-Street, Mulberry-Street, Chestnut-Street, Sassafras-Street, taking their Names from the abundance of those Trees that formerly grew there, High-Street, Broad-Street, Delaware-Street, Front-Street, with several of less Note, too tedious to insert here.

It hath in it Three Fairs every Year, and Two Markets every Week. They kill above Twenty Fat Bullocks every Week, in the hottest time in Summer, for their present spending in that City, besides many Sheep, Calves, and Hogs.

This City is Situated between Schoolkill-River and the great River Delaware, which derives its Name from Captain Delaware, who came there pretty early: Ships of Two or Three Hundred Tuns may come up to this City, by either of these two Rivers. Moreover, in this Province are Four Great Market-Towns, viz, Chester, the German Town, New-Castle, and Lewis-Town, which are mightily Enlarged in this latter Improvement. Between these Towns, the Water-Men constantly Ply their Wherries [light boats]; likewise all those Towns have Fairs kept in them, besides there are several Country Villages, viz, Dublin, Harford, Merioneth, and Radnor in Cambry; all which Towns, Villages and Rivers took their Names from the several Countries whence the present Inhabitants came.

The Air here is very delicate, pleasant, and wholesome; the Heavens serene,

Philadelphia, 1702



In 1662 William Penn planned this city to be laid out with a grid design between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers. He originally intended that four small squares and one large square of open space be preserved for civic and religious purposes, but as this drawing shows, the need for buildings quickly upset Penn's scheme.

rarely overcast, bearing mighty resemblance to the better part of France; after Rain they have commonly a very clear Sky, the Climate is something Colder in the depth of Winter and Hotter in the height of Summer; (the cause of which is its being a Main Land or Continent; the Days also are two Hours longer in the shortest Day in Winter, and shorter by two Hours in the long Day of Summer) than here in England, which makes the Fruit so good, and the Earth so fertile. . . .

It is now time to return to the City of Brotherly-Love (for so much the Greek Word or Name Philadelphia imports) which though at present so obscure, that neither the Map-Makers nor Geographers have taken the least notice of her, tho she far exceeds her Namesake of Lydia [a town named Philadelphia was located in Lydia in Asia Minor] . . . yet in a very short space of time she will, in all probability, make a fine Figure in the World, and be a most Celebrated Emporium. Here is lately built a Noble Town-House or Guild-Hall, also a Handsom Market-House, and a convenient Prison. The Number of Christians both Old and Young Inhabiting in that Countrey, are by a Modest Computation, adjudged to amount to above Twenty Thousand.

The Laws of this Countrey, are the same with those in England; our Constitution being on the same Foot: Many Disputes or Differences are determined and composed by Arbitration; and all Causes are decided with great Care and Expedition, being concluded (generally) at furthest at the Second Court, unless they happen to be very Nice and Difficult Cases; under Forty Shillings any one Justice of the Peace has Power to Try the Cause. Thieves of all sorts, are oblig'd to restore four fold after they have been Whipt and Imprison'd, according to the Nature of

their Crime; and if they be not of Ability to restore four fold, they must be in Servitude till 'tis satisfied. They have Curious Wharfs as also several large and fine Timber-Yards, both at Philadelphia, and New-Castle, especially at the Metropolis, before Robert Turner's Great and Famous House, where are built Ships of considerable Burthen; they Cart their Goods from that Wharf into the City of Philadelphia, under an Arch, over which part of the Street is built, which is called Chestnut-Street-Wharf, besides other Wharfs, as High-Street Wharf, Mulberry-Street Wharf, and Vine-Street Wharf, and all those are Common Wharfs; and likewise there are very pleasant Stairs, as Trus and Carpenter-Stairs, besides several others. There are above Thirty Carts belonging to that City, Four or Five Horses to each. There is likewise a very convenient Wharf called Carpenter's Wharf, which hath a fine necessary Crain belonging to it, with suitable Granaries, and Store-Houses. A Ship of Two Hundred Tun may load and unload by the side of it, and there are other Wharfs (with Magazines and Ware-houses) which front the City all along the River. . . . They have very Stately Oaks to build Ships with, some of which are between Fifty and Sixty Foot long, and clear from Knots, being very straight and well Grain'd. In this famous City of Philadelphia there are several Rope-Makers, who have large and curious Rope-Walks, especially one Joseph Wilcox. Also Three or Four Spacious Malt-Houses, as many large Brew-Houses, and many handsom Bake-Houses for Publick Use.

In the said City are several good Schools of Learning for Youth, in order to the Attainment of Arts and Sciences, as also Reading, Writing, etc. Here is to be had on any Day in the Week, Tarts, Pies, Cakes, etc. We have also several Cook-Shops, both Roasting and Boyling, as in the City of London; Bread, Beer, Beef, and Pork are sold at any time much cheaper than in England (which arises from their Plenty) our Wheat is very white and clear from Tares, making as good and white Bread as any in Europe. Happy Blessings, for which we owe the highest Gratitude to our Plentiful Provider, the great Creator of Heaven and Earth. The Water-Mills far exceed those in England, both for quickness and grinding good Meal, their being great choice of good Timber, and earlier Corn than in the aforesaid Place, they are made by one Peter Deal, a Famous and Ingenious Workman, especially for inventing such like Machines.

All sorts of very good Paper are made in the German-Town; as also very fine German Linen, such as no Person of Quality need be ashamed to wear; and in several places they make very good Druggests, Crapes, Camblets, and Serges, besides other Woollen Cloathes, the Manufacture of all which daily improves: And in most parts of the Countey, there are many Curious and Spacious Buildings, which several of the Gentry have erected for their Country-Houses. As for the Fruit-Trees they Plant, they arrive at such Perfection, that they bear in a little more than half the time that they commonly do in England. . . .

What I have deliver'd concerning this Province, is indisputably true, I was an Eye-Witness to it all, for I went in the first Ship that was bound from England for that Country, since it received the Name of Pensilvania, which was in the Year 1681. The Ship's Name was the *John and Sarah* of London, Henry Smith Commander. I have declin'd giving any Account of several things which I have only heard others speak of, because I did not see them my self, for I never held that

way infallible, to make Reports from Hear-say. I saw the first Cellar when I was digging it for the use of our Governor Will. Penn.

Observations on the Social Structure in Colonial Boston, 1701

That Honourable and Learned Gentleman, the Author of a Sheet, Entitled, *The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial*, seems from thence to draw this conclusion, that because the Sons of *Jacob* did very ill in Selling their Brother *Joseph* to Buy and Sell Negroes, though among Christians; which conclusion I presume is not well drawn from the Premise, nor is the case parallel; for it was unlawful for the *Israelites* to Sell their Brethren upon any account, or pretence whatsoever during life. But it was not unlawful for the Seed of *Abraham* to have Bond men, and Bond women, either born in their House, or bought with their Money, as it is written of *Abraham, Gen. 14.14. & 21.10. & Exod. 21.16. & Levit. 25.44, 45, 46 v.* After the giving of the Law: And in *Josh. 9.29.* That famous Example of the *Gideonite* is a sufficient proof were there no other.

To speak a little to the Gentleman's first Assertion: *That none ought to part with their Liberty themselves, or deprive others of it but upon mature consideration*; a prudent exception, in which he grants, that upon some consideration a man may be deprived of his Liberty. And then presently in his next Position or Assertion he denies it, viz. *It is most certain, that all men as they are the Sons of Adam are brothers, and have equal right to Liberty, and all other Comforts of Life*, which he would prove out of *Psal. 115.16. The Earth hath he given to the Children of men.* True, but what is this to the purpose, to prove that all men have equal right to Liberty, and all outward comforts of this life; which Position seems to invert the Order that God hath set in the World, who hath Ordained different degrees and orders of men, some to be High and Honourable, some to be Low and Despicable; some to be Monarchs, Kings, Princes and Governors, Masters and Commanders, others to be Subjects, and to be Commanded; Servants of sundry sorts and degrees, bound to obey; yes some to be born Slaves, and so to remain during their lives, as hath been proved. Otherwise there would be a near parity among men, contrary to that of the Apostles, *1 Cor. 12.* from the 13. to the 24 verse, where he sets forth (by way of comparison) the different sorts and offices of the Members of the Body, indicating that they are all of use, but not equal, and of like dignity. So God hath set different Orders and Degrees of men in the World, both in Church and Common weal. Now if this Position of parity should be true, it would then follow that the ordinary Course of Divine Providence of God in the World should be wrong, and unjust (which we must not dare to think, much less to affirm) and all the sacred Rules, Precepts and Commands of the Almighty which he hath given the Sons of men to observe and keep in their respective Places, Orders and Degrees, would be to no purpose; which unaccountably derogate from this Divine Wisdom of the most High, who hath made nothing in vain, but hath Holy Ends in all his Dispensations to the Children of men.

. . . We grant it for a certain and undeniable verity, That all Mankind are the

Sons and Daughters of *Adam*, and the Creatures of God; But it doth not therefore follow that we are bound to love and respect all men alike; this under favor we must take leave to deny; we ought in charity, if we see our Neighbour in want, to relieve them in a regular way, but we are not bound to give them so much of our Estates, as to make them equal with ourselves, because they are our Brethren, the Sons of *Adam*, no not our own natural Kinsmen: We are Exhorted to *do good unto all, but especially to them who are of the Household of Faith, Gal. 6.10.* And we are to love, honor and respect all men according to the gift of God that is in them: I may love my Servant well, but my Son better; Charity begins at home, it would be a violation of common prudence, and a breach of good manners, to treat a Prince like a Peasant. And this worthy Gentleman would deem himself much neglected, if we should show him no more Deference than to an ordinary Porter: And therefore these florid expressions, the Sons and Daughters of the First *Adam*, the Brothers and Sisters of the Second *Adam*, and the Offspring of God, seem to be misapplied to import and insinuate, that we ought to tender Pagan Negroes with all love, kindness, and equal respect as to the best of men. . . .

Attorney James Allen Views Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia (1770-1775), 1885

November 6th, 1770. I have often thought that committing to writing little occurrences in private matters might in some future period of life afford amusement in the perusal, & have frequently regretted, my inability of recalling to mind many past scenes of my earlier days. To run over the employments of times past with the catalogue of former acquaintance, thro' all their changes, must be an high gratification. These reflections have led me into the design of keeping a Diary, in which I do not propose to admit any occurrences of a publick nature; I shall leave those to Gazettes & Magazines, and only preserve the remembrance of such private interesting scenes & conversations as will be entertaining in a review. And I will take special care, not to make my Diary a register of such things as ought to be forgotten, or can possibly do an injury to any one; & on this principle neither the follies or vices of any one shall find admission here. . . .

Sept. 13th, 1771. Lord Dunmore passed thro' this town on his way to Virginia; I dined & supped with him. This day I set off for Trent hall with my Wife and child and M^{rs} Lawrence; they have not been there since I finished my house.

Tho' I have advanced so little ways in my diary I find the fatigue and trouble of keeping it regularly too great & makes too great a waste of time; & am apprehensive it will fall thro', or at least grow irregular.

May 29th, 1772. I am now convinced that I shall not be able to continue this journal; finding my business will not admit of so much leisure as a journalist should have. This day I moved into my house in Chestnut Street, where I hope to end my days. I am at present much engaged in prosecutions for breaches of the laws of Trade & have libelled four of five Vessels & Cargoes for Capt Talbot of the Lively Man of War. I am doing, as a Lawyer what I would not do as a politician; being fully persuaded of the oppressive nature of those laws. I have however

refused to prosecute two or 3 persons on the penal clauses, as thinking it invidious & rigid.

May 19th, 1773. . . . Governor Eden & Coll. Washington are in Town come to the races. Waters's horse Herod won the £100 yesterday & Mr Delancey's Sultan £50 today. The town is very gay & invitations frequent. I asked Gov. Eden & Coll. Washington to dinner but they are engaged during their stay. . . .

Oct. 19th, 1773. Yesterday morning about 5 o'clock as I lay in Bed I felt a severe pain in my instep & on getting up found that the sinew was strained. As I had received no injury to my foot from any external cause & was not sensible of having a fit of the Cramp my friends pronounced it a gouty symptom. I continued in great pain for 4 to 5 hours but towards evening the sinew recovered its Tone. This morning I am lame with a pain under the instep in the bottom of the foot resembling a strain also. I make this Memorandum, that if I should ever be afflicted with the Gout, I may date it from this Period. NB I eat no supper & have been very sparing in that Article for a long time.

Octob. 30th, 1773. . . . I often reflect how happy it was for me that I took to the practice of the law. Added to the uneasiness that it gave my father & all my friends to find that after having served a regular clerkship & been three years at the temple, I should continue an Idel man I say added to this consideration I have now made myself easy in my circumstances. I compute my business this year 1773 will be between £3(00) & 400, which added to my estate will fall but little short of £:8(00)-1000 (per) annum. For these last two or three years, which is the time that I resumed the practice of the Law, I have read pretty diligently & have overcome the difficulty of speaking in publick. In short both the study & practice are become agreeable to me. . . .

Jany. 19th, 1775. . . . The variance subsisting between M^r Masters's family & mine is like to be healed, as the Ladies, (who have on all sides been uneasy, lent from a fatality attending female differences, can never make mutual advances) have by consent met together at M^r Lawrences & when my wife returns from New-York she will visit them. I have ever had an abhorrence of family quarrells & am convinced that good Temper & civility will make friends & carry a man peaceably thro' the world without any unworthy condescension.

M^{rs} Allen has now been absent 3 weeks on a Journey to New York with the Governor & M^{rs} Penn, & is expected home this Evening. It is the first excursion she has made since her marriage. . . .

October 11th, 1775. Johnny Mifflin came this day to study law with me.

About 2 Months ago I heard M^r Hamilton say that he formerly knew every person white & black men women, & children, in the City of Philadelphia, by name.

Oct. 14th, 1775. Yesterday the Gridiron Grove Club gave an entertainment in their usual frugal style to 23 Ladies; we dined till 10 o'clock & were very

chearful; I was in remarkable good spirits; Miss Sally Robinson bore the belle; she is a very fine woman both in person and understanding. . . .

William Penn on the Promise of Real-Estate Investment, c. 1687

II. Philadelphia, and our intended Metropolis, as I formerly Writ, is two Miles long, and a Mile broad, and at each end it lies that mile upon a Navigable River. The situation high and dry, yet replenished with running streams. Besides the High Street, that runs in the middle from River to River, and is an hundred foot broad, it has Eight streets more that run the same course, the least of which is fifty foot in breadth. And besides Broad Street, wich crosseth the Town in the middle, and is also an hundred foot wide, there are twenty streets more, that run the same course, and are also fifty foot broad. The names of those Streets are mostly taken from the things that Spontaneously grow in the Country, As Vine Street, Mulberry Street, Chestnut Street, Wallnut Street, Strawberry Street, Cranberry Street, Plumb Street, Oake Street, Beach Street, Ash Street, Poplar Street, Sassafras Street, and the like.

III. I mentioned in my last Account that from my Arrival, in Eighty-Two, to the Date thereof, being ten Moneths, we had got up Fourscore Houses at our Town, and that some Villages were settled about it. From that time to my coming away, which was a Year within a few Weeks, the Town advanced to Three hundred and fifty-seven Houses; divers of them large, well built, with good Cellars, three stories, and some with Balconies.

IV. There is also a fair key [wharf] of about three hundred foot square, Built by Samuel Carpenter, to which a ship of five hundred Tuns may lay her broadside, and others intend to follow his example. We have also a Ropewalk made by B. Wilcox, and cordage for shipping already spun at it.

V. There inhabits most sorts of useful Tradesmen, As Carpenters, Joyners, Bricklayers, Masons, Plasterers, Plumers, Smiths, Glasiers, Taylers, Shoemakers, Butchers, Bakers, Brewers, Glovers, Tanners, Felmongers, Wheelrights, Millrights, Shiprights, Boatrights, Ropemakers, Saylmakers, Blockmakers, Turners, etc.

VI. There are Two Markets every Week, and Two Fairs every year. . . .

IX. After nine at Night the Officers go the Rounds, and no Person, without very good cause, suffered to be at any Publick House that is not a Lodger. . . .

XIV. The Improvement of the place is best measur'd by the advance of Value upon every man's Lot. I will venture to say that the worst Lot in the Town,

without any Improvement upon it, is worth four times more than it was when it was lay'd out, and the best forty. . . .

Swedish Traveler Peter Kalm Considers New York in the 1740s

New York probably carries on a more extensive commerce than any town in the English North American provinces, at least it may be said to equal them. Boston and Philadelphia however come very close to it. The trade of New York extends to many places, and it is said they send more ships from there to London than they do from Philadelphia. They export to that capital all the various sorts of skins which they buy of the Indians, sugar, logwood, and other dyeing woods, rum, mahogany, and many other goods which are the produce of the West Indies, together with all the specie which they get in the course of trade. Every year several ships are built here, which are sent to London and there sold; and of late years a quantity of iron has been shipped to England. In return for all these, cloth is imported from London and so is every article of English growth or manufacture, together with all sorts of foreign goods. England, and especially London, profits immensely by its trade with the American colonies; for not only New York but likewise all the other English towns on the continent import so many articles from England that all their specie, together with the goods which they get in other countries must all go to Old England to pay their accounts there, for which they are, however, insufficient. Hence it appears how much a well regulated colony contributes to the increase and welfare of its mother country.

New York sends many ships to the West Indies with flour, grain, biscuit, timber, tuns, boards, meat and pork, butter, and other provisions, together with some of the few fruits that grow here. Many ships go to Boston in New England with grain and flour, and take in exchange, meat, butter, timber, different sorts of fish, and other articles, which they carry further to the West Indies. They now and then carry rum from Boston, which is distilled there in great quantities, and sell it here at a considerable advantage. Sometimes they send vessels with goods from New York to Philadelphia; and at other times they are sent from Philadelphia to New York, which is only done, as appears from the gazettes, because certain articles are cheaper at one place than at the other. They send ships to Ireland every year, laden with all kinds of West India goods, but especially with linseed, which is collected in this country. . . .

For the goods which are sold in the West Indies either ready money is accepted or West India goods, which are either first brought to New York or immediately sent to England or Holland. If a ship does not choose to take West India goods on its return to New York, or if nobody will freight it, it often goes to Newcastle in England to take on coal for ballast, which when brought home sells for a pretty good price. In many parts of the town coal is used both for kitchen fires and in other rooms, because it is considered cheaper than wood, which at present costs thirty shillings of New York currency per fathom, of which measure I have before made mention. New York has likewise some trade with South

Carolina, to which it sends grain, flour, sugar, rum, and other goods, and takes rice in return, which is almost the only commodity exported from South Carolina. . . .

The country people come to market in New York twice a week, much in the same manner as they do at Philadelphia, with this difference, that the markets are here kept in several places, and one has to go from one to another sometimes to get what one needs. . . .

The Albany City Council at Work, c. 1701–1702

Nov. 11 (1701). Ms. Johannis Lydius minister, Anthony van Schaick and Hendk. van Rensselaer elders, in the behalfe of the Church Wardens of the Reformed Netherdutch Congregation of Albany, doo appear and verbally actt forth how that in Collecting of money for the Minsters Sallary severall of said Congregation do refuse to contribute any more thereto, alleadgeing that they have no settled place in the Church to sett on and hear the word of God.

Doe therefore Request that the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonality will be pleased to permit them to appoint persones to goe round by the Inhabitants of this City and others in the County belonging to said Congregation, to see what money can be voluntarily procured for the enlarging of said Church for the more accommodation. . . .

The Mayor, Aldermen and Commonality have appointed the following persones as fyre masters of the Citty for the ensuing year, viz: Ryer Gerritse, Thomas Williams, Abraham Kip, Elbert Gerritse, Thomas Harmense, and Gerrit Ryckse, who are once in each three weeks till the 14th of October next ensuing, to goe rounde with the assistance of one or more Constables, and vew each house or room where fyre is held, and wherever a Chimney shall be founde too foul or fyre keep in inconvenient places, to cause the same to be removed the owner paying as a fyne, 3s. for the behoofe of the fyre masters. . . .

It is concluded that a proclamation be made that no person shall sell strong Liquor by Retaile without Lycence, upon paine and penalty of forfeiting the summe of £5, according to act of assembly.

As also, that the fyre ladders and hooks be laid by the Church, and whosoever as shall presume to use the same, unless in distress of fyre, shall forfeit the summe of 3s. as often as they shall be used, for the Behoofe of the Sheriffe, who is to take care of the same. . . .

Att a Common Councill held in the Citty Hall of Albany the 15th December, 1701.

Mr. Mayor proposes desyring the opinion of the Commonality if it is not requisite to issue a warrant to the assessors to make an assessment for as many stockades as will require to fortifye the Citty with the new stockades sett up this summer. The Commonality are of opinion that it may be referred till the post arrives from New Yorke, which will be about new years day, alleadgeing that perhaps wee may receive assured news of the continuation of peace, when it will not so necessarily require so great a reparation in one winter. . . .

Albany, the 21st of Feb. 1702.

A Proclamation proclaimed that all persons within this Citty and County doe cause there weights and measures be adjusted by Coenraet ten Eyck, in the space of six months, upon pain of forfeiting the sum of sixty shillings; and whoever as shall send bags to the mill with Corn without the owners mark forfeits the bags for the behoofe of the . . . sheriffe; . . .

Att a Meeting of the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council in Albany, the 31st of March, 1702.

It is Resolved that a Proclamation be made to Ring the hogs belonging to this Citty, in there noses, in the space of thrice 24 hours, upon penalty of forfeiting the same, as also that each Inhabitant doe remove there fyre wood from the streets, and to lay the timber wood together, before the first of May next ensuing, upon penalty of forfeiting for each day after primo May not so removed, the summe of three shillings, and that the Constables be not neglecting by turns to goe round and see that the Sabbath day be not Broak, which proclamation is accordingly proclaimed. . . .

Att a Mayor's Court held in the Citty Hall of Albany, the 18th of August, 1702. Upon the request of Coll. Peter Schuyler in the behalfe of his Mother, Mrs. Margaret Schuyler, on the 16th instant a warrant was issued to the Sheriffe to fetch the negroe Tam, belonging to Claes van Bockhorne, who is accused to have received severall goods and money from the two negroe women of said Mrs. Schuyler, who have taken the same from her, whereupon the said negroe Tam appears here, and being examined confesses to have received money from the said negroe woman, but hath sometime thereafter delivered the same to the negro of Johannis Beckman, the Court are thereof of opinion, since he hath returned said money that he or his master shall be pay the Charges fallen thereon, in the meantime the said negroe shall remain the custody of the Sheriffe till such time he hath received satisfaction. . . .

Sept. 2 (1702). Ordered that the Following Proclamation be Proclaimed, viz: By Authority Aforesaid, and Justices of the County.

Whereas wee are sencible of the dayly visitations of Almighty God to our neighbours of New Yorke, with great sicknesse and sudden death, altho lesse punishment than they or wee have deserved, yet not to withstand the hand of Almighty, but as much as in us lyes to shun any ill distemper, wee, the Mayor, Recorder, Aldermen, and Commonality, and Justices, doe hereby Publish and Prohibite that no Person or Personnes, either with Sloop, Boat, Canoe or other Vessell, shall from hence depart to New Yorke, except it be an Expresse, and that no person or persons shall in like manner, on any other way, come from New Yorke to this Citty, nearer than the Island called Bearen Island, twelve miles to the south of this Citty, and there to remain till further order from us, and also that no (woolen) goods be landed from the sloop or vessell of Peter Bogardus late arrived, or any other vessells that arrives, as they will answer to the contrary on there outmost peril. . . .

✂ ESSAYS

These essays present different perspectives on colonial-era urban communities. The first, by Gary B. Nash of the University of California, Los Angeles, is taken from *The Urban Crucible* (1979), an important book on how cities developed and eventually contributed to the American Revolution. This excerpt includes an especially comprehensive analysis of the commercial foci of the cities, their complex social composition, and the importance of the social hierarchy that influenced social relations. The second essay, by Ira Berlin of the University of Maryland, offers a unique vantage on the black communities in colonial cities in terms of social and economic issues, particularly the "Africanization" of such communities.

The Web of Seaport Life, 1600–1700*

GARY B. NASH

Water dominated the life of America's northern seaport towns in the seventeenth century, dictating their physical arrangement, providing them with their links to the outer world, yielding up much of their sustenance, and subtly affecting the relationships among the different groups who made up these budding commercial capitals. Boston was almost entirely surrounded by water. Built on a tadpole-shaped peninsula that jutted into island-dotted Massachusetts Bay, the town was connected to the mainland only by the mile-long causeway called the Neck. New York was literally an island, set in perhaps the finest natural harbor on the continent and separated from its hinterland by the East and Hudson rivers. At a time when steel bridge construction was still more than a century away, it was accessible only by ferry, barge, or small wind-propelled craft. Philadelphia was almost one hundred miles from the sea, but it was planted on a broad strip of land between the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers—the latter providing its access to the ocean.

The colonial seaports existed primarily as crossroads of maritime transport and commercial interchange. European cities had often grown up as centers of civil and ecclesiastical administration and by the early nineteenth century they would expand greatly as centers of industrial production. But Boston, New York, and Philadelphia served primarily as points of entry for immigrating Europeans and Africans and as commercial marts serving hinterland populations. The ocean was the highway connecting the Old World and the New, and the seaport towns were the vital link between the two. They gathered in the timber, fish, and agricultural produce that came from the rural settlers who made up the vast majority of the colonial population, sending it off to West Indian and European markets and distributing finished European goods throughout the regions they served.

At the end of the seventeenth century the seaport towns were really only

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overgrown villages. Boston was the largest. Growing slowly for six decades after the Great Migration of English Puritans in 1630, it reached a population of about 6,000 by 1690. New York, founded five years before Boston by the Dutch West India Company and known as New Amsterdam until conquered by the English in 1664, increased only to 3,500 by 1674 and to about 4,500 by 1690. Philadelphia, not planted until 1681, when William Penn received an immense grant from Charles II and promoted a movement of English and Irish Quakers across the Atlantic, was still in its infancy at the turn of the century, counting only about 2,200 inhabitants. None of the American port towns could compare with even the secondary commercial centers of western Europe such as Lyon, which had reached 45,000 in the 1530s, or Norwich, which had grown to 19,000 by the 1570s. Nor could they claim equal status with the cities of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies to the south, where Bahia, Cartagena, Potosi, and Mexico City, built on the ruins of ancient Indian urban centers, numbered 50,000 or more by the end of the seventeenth century.

The insignificant size of these seaports in British North America did not indicate English backwardness or a preference for the pastoral, agricultural life. The port towns were small because they served regional populations that themselves were still very limited. The population of Massachusetts had not yet reached 50,000 in 1690, so it is not surprising that Boston counted only 6,000 souls. Similarly, New York and Philadelphia served agricultural populations that had grown to no more than 14,000 and 12,000 respectively.

The reduced scale of life in these late seventeenth-century ports made face-to-face relationships important. Craftsmen did not produce for anonymous customers or distant markets but labored almost entirely at turning out "bespoke goods"—articles made to order for individual customers. Nor would anybody long be a stranger in a town whose boundaries could be traversed on foot in a brisk thirty-minute walk. Bostonians did not spread out across their peninsula but crowded together between Beacon Hill, Copp's Hill, and Fort Hill along the southeastern shore that faced the harbor. New Yorkers did not range across the island of Manhattan but squeezed together at its southern tip, in the area known today as Wall Street. Philadelphia, where as late as 1750 the skyline was unbroken by a single building of more than three stories, covered a tract of about 1,200 acres. But its inhabitants chose their building sites along a one-mile stretch of Delaware River frontage, penetrating inland from the rivers no more than three blocks in the first quarter-century of settlement. Proximity to the harbor and wharves was on everyone's mind. A byproduct of this mode of settlement, in what urban historians call "walking cities," was a mixing of classes, occupations, religious beliefs, and ethnic backgrounds in the early years. . . .

In probing the social dynamics of the early towns, it is essential to recognize that these were preindustrial societies in which tradition held sway. Little about the late seventeenth-century towns would be recognizable to the twentieth-century urbanite. Cows were commonly tethered behind the crudely built wooden houses, for milk was a commodity that most householders could not afford to purchase. Hogs roamed the streets because, as scavengers of refuse, they were the chief sanitary engineers in an age when most household wastes were emptied into ditches running down the middle of the streets. Indian shell beads, called

wampum, were still in use as a medium of exchange in New York at the end of the seventeenth century, and paper money was as yet unknown except in Boston where it made its first appearance in 1690. There were no newspapers printed in the colonies before 1704, when the *Boston News-Letter* was first published. Philadelphians would wait until 1719 to see a newspaper in their city and New Yorkers until 1725. Lawyers, another fixture of the modern city, were everywhere regarded with suspicion, and the few who practiced in the late seventeenth century were largely untrained, unorganized, and little respected. . . .

We must consider the values that lay behind human behavior in the context of these premodern aspects of urban life. Superstition and belief in the supernatural were widespread, for though urban dwellers might be more worldly than their country cousins, they were still bound within an inherited mental framework that had been formed by the precariousness of life and the incomprehensibility of nature. The seaport towns were not traumatized in 1690 by the witchcraft hysteria that shook Salem, Boston's neighbor, but most town dwellers believed that witches were truly abroad in Salem. Witches were as real as the devil, and witchcraft was a crime "as definite and tangible as is treason today." As late as 1727 an earthquake that shook most of New England was interpreted by the lettered and unlettered alike as evidence of God's displeasure with his people in this corner of the earth. . . .

Another part of the value system was the prevailing orientation toward the proper arrangement and functioning of society. . . . Virtually everyone of wealth or position in the port towns adhered to the axiom that rank and status must be carefully preserved and social roles clearly differentiated if society was to retain its equilibrium. This was a cast of thought inherited from the Old World, although some colonizers recognized that a new environment might call for alterations. Social stability was uppermost in the minds of most of these leaders, and they believed that nothing counted for more in its achievement than a careful demarcation of status and privilege. John Winthrop, the leader of the Puritan occupation of Massachusetts Bay, echoed ancient thinking that social unity and political stability were the products of a hierarchical social system that preserved distances between occupational groups and limited movement between them. "In all times," he wrote, "some must be rich, some poor, some highe and eminent in power and dignitie, others meane and in subjecion." Winthrop's conception of the carefully layered society where mobility was limited was perpetuated in Boston by a long line of Puritan clergymen who exhorted their auditors in this vein for many decades to come. . . .

In New York and Philadelphia it was much the same. The religious impulse that reverberated so powerfully in Boston was more subdued in the Manhattan port, the least utopian of the northern capitals, but it was widely believed by those at the apex of the social pyramid that all men, by God's design, were created unequal. In Pennsylvania, also, the "holy experiment" was thought by its founder to depend for success on orderly patterns of taking up land, economic regulation, and firm lines of authority. . . .

This perpetuation of social hierarchy can be seen in many of the conventions of urban life at the end of the seventeenth century. Puritans did not file into church on Sunday morning and occupy the pews in random fashion. Each was assigned a seat according to his or her rank in the community. "Dooming the seats" was the

responsibility of a church committee that used every available yardstick of social status—age, parentage, social position, service to the community, and wealth—in drawing up a seating plan for the congregation. In New York, whipping, the most common punishment meted out by the courts for minor offenses, was not permitted for men of rank, though the stripping away of the right to use "Mister" before one's name, or "Gentleman" after it, may have been more painful than the lash. In their dress, speech, manners, and even the food on their tables, urban dwellers proclaimed their place in the social order.

While this replication of traditional European social attitudes regarding the structuring of society was widespread, and even regarded by many as God-ordained, it was not universally accepted; nor was it unaffected by the environment of the New World. Those already in positions of authority or possessed of economic advantage were the principal proponents of a paternalistic system that steadfastly advocated social gradations and subordination, for they, after all, were the chief beneficiaries of such an arrangement. Those below them in the social order were often less eager merely to recreate the past in the new land. As early as 1651 in Massachusetts the magistrates of the General Court expressed their "utter detestation and dislike that men and women of meane Condition should take upon themselves the garb of Gentlemen by wearing gold or silver, lace or buttons, or points at their knees or to walk in bootes or women of the same rancke to weare silk or tiffany horlles or scarfes, which though allowable to persons of greater estate, or more liberal education, yet we cannot but judge it intollerable in persons of like condition." Here was a signal that many early Bostonians not only were able to improve their condition but also intended to use their newfound prosperity to enhance their wardrobes, thereby upgrading their class identification, of which clothes were a primary badge. Such upward striving might have been expected, for the immigrants who settled the early towns were generally recruited from the middling ranks of English society and had been drawn to the western edge of the Atlantic because they were motivated, among other things, by a desire to better themselves economically. The impressive quantity of late seventeenth-century jeremiads concerning the need for order and discipline in Massachusetts is one more indication that many colonists, especially those not at the top of the social pyramid, found the old hierarchical code out of place and out of time.

To what extent hierarchical thinking pervaded the upper ranks of seaport society and to what degree it was resisted from below cannot be measured quantitatively. It is safe to say, however, that although almost every urban dweller knew instinctively his or her relation to those below and above, there was much crossing of lines between social layers and, even by the 1690s, a long history of un-deferential behavior among plebeian sorts. We employ the term deference to describe the unquestioning acceptance of the superior wisdom of an elite by the broad mass of people. It is easy, however, to overstate the operation of a well-oiled set of relationships between superiors and inferiors, and the unresentful acceptance of them as natural. Many urban people deferred because their economic security was bound up with a landlord, employer, or creditor. This was economic clientage, and it doubtlessly produced social deference. But the obliging comment and passive demeanor of a journeyman carpenter or merchant seaman could melt away in moments of passion or collective action and often did not extend at all to other powerful figures whose control was less direct. Many vertical links

bound urban society together and inhibited the formation of solidarities that were horizontal in nature. But these interracial bonds forged by vertical loyalty and obligations were by no means all-encompassing or unchanging. Time and circumstances altered social consciousness, wore away at deferential behavior, and gave rise to feelings of solidarity that were based on occupation, economic position, and class standing.

Closely tied to attitudes about the structural arrangement of society was the urban dweller's sense of whether his or her community functioned equitably. The important gap to measure is the one between aspiration and achievement. We must tread carefully in approaching this question, for twentieth-century concepts of mobility and contemporary expectations of success will help us little in studying preindustrial people. The rise from rags to riches cannot be taken as a universal expectation.

In the late seventeenth century the limits of possibility had not yet been raised very high in the minds of most urban dwellers. Few Scots-Irish or German immigrants in Philadelphia, Dutch residents of New York, or English inhabitants of Boston dreamed of becoming wealthy merchants or country gentlemen. Nor did they regard themselves as "blocked" if they, or even their sons, could not make it to the top. They were coming from a society where intergenerational movement was almost imperceptible, where sons unquestioningly followed their father's trades, where the Protestant work ethic did not beat resoundingly in every breast, and where security from want, rather than the acquisition of riches, was the primary goal. It was modest opportunity (access to sufficient capital, land, and labor to produce material well-being) rather than rapid mobility (social ascendancy at the expense of others) that was most important in their calculations of whether equity prevailed in their society.

Much of the urban laboring man's sense of what was possible was shaped by the distinctly premodern nature of economic life in the port towns. Routinized, repetitive labor and the standardized work day, regulated by the clock, were unknown in this preindustrial era. Even the Protestant work ethic could not change irregular work patterns, for they were dictated by weather, hours of daylight, and the erratic delivery of raw materials. When the cost of fuel for artificial light was greater than the extra income that could be derived from laboring before or after sunlight hours, who would not shorten his day during winter? Similarly, when winter descended, business often ground to a halt. Even in the southernmost of the northern ports, ice frequently blocked maritime traffic. In the winter of 1728–29, 36 ships lay frozen at dockside in Philadelphia; several decades later a visitor counted 117 ships icebound in the Delaware. This meant slack time for mariners and dockworkers, just as laborers engaged in well digging, road building, and cellar excavating for house construction were idled by frozen ground. The hurricane season in the West Indies forced another slowdown because few shipowners were willing to place their ships and cargoes before the killer winds that prevailed in the Caribbean from August to October. If prolonged rain delayed the slaughter of cows in the country or made impassable the rutted roads into the city, then the tanner laid his tools aside and for lack of his deliveries the cordwainer was also idle. The hatter was dependent upon the supply of beaver skins, which could stop abruptly if disease struck an Indian tribe or war disrupted the fur trade. Weather, disease, and equinoctial cycles all contributed to the fitful pace of urban labor—

and therefore to the difficulties of producing a steady income. Food and housing cost money every day of the year, but in calculating his income the urban dweller had to count on many "broken days," slack spells, and dull seasons. . . .

From attitudes and aspirations we must turn to the actual structure of the late seventeenth-century port towns and reach some understanding of how they differed from the European commercial centers that the urban colonists had left behind.

At the bottom of the social hierarchy were black slaves. The common view that slavery in colonial America was overwhelmingly a southern plantation phenomenon must be modified, for slavery took root early in the northern port towns and persisted there throughout the colonial period. By 1690, in fact, slaves represented as large a proportion of the northern urban populations as they did in tobacco-growing Maryland and Virginia. Boston was only eighty years old, a town with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants, when it began its connection with the "peculiar institution." Victorious in a war of extermination against the Pequot Indians, Massachusetts shipped several hundred captive Pequot women and children to the West Indies, where they were exchanged for African slaves. A few years later, in 1645, the brother-in-law of John Winthrop counseled war against another Indian tribe, the Narragansetts, and argued "if upon a Just warre the Lord should deliver them [the Narragansetts] into our hands, wee might easily have men, women, and children enough to exchange for Moores, which wilbe more gaynefull pilladge for us than wee conceive, for I doe not see how wee can thrive untill wee gett into a stock of slaves sufficient to doe all our business, . . . [for] I suppose you know verie well how wee shall mainteyne 20 Moores cheaper than one Englishe servant." . . .

While the roots of slavery slowly penetrated the soil of Boston, they sank faster and deeper into that of New York. Boston's initiation to black slavery had been indirect, coming as a result of the enslavement of Indians; New York's introduction stemmed directly from the extensive early Dutch participation in the international slave trade to West Africa. Dutch New Netherlands traded extensively with Dutch Curaçao, a sugar island off the coast of South America that produced a steady stream of "unworkable" slaves who were consequently transported for nonplantation labor to the mainland colony. In the last five years before the English takeover of New Netherlands, more than 400 slaves entered its capital city. The English, in capturing New Amsterdam in 1664, were seizing a city whose population was 20 percent black, about four times the incidence of blacks in Virginia and Maryland at this time. The English imported fewer Africans than the Dutch but they made no attempt to phase out slave labor. By 1698, when the first English census was conducted in the city, Negroes represented more than 14 percent of the population. Even more indicative of the extent to which the master-slave relationship was incorporated into the social structure was the number of slaveholding families in the society. In 1698, almost 35 percent of the heads of household owned slaves and five years later the percentage had increased to 41. . . .

In Philadelphia slavery also found its place from the beginning, although most historical accounts leave the impression that the institution was incidental to the city's development. The spirit of Quaker abolitionism was still a half century

away when the earliest settlers gladly received a shipload of African slaves, who arrived only three years after the Delaware River capital had been established. Quaker settlers, engaged in the difficult work of clearing trees and brush and erecting crude houses eagerly exhausted most of the specie brought from England to purchase Africans. Extant inventories of estate indicate that about one of every fifteen families owned slaves in the last decade of the seventeenth century—a rate understandably below that of New York and Boston since Philadelphia was in its infancy and had not yet generated sufficient capital for the importation of large numbers of involuntary servants.

Above slaves in the urban social structure were indentured servants. Trading four to seven years of their labor for passage across the Atlantic and sold at dockside to the highest bidder, they were circumscribed so thoroughly by the law that most rights regarded as basic to the English heritage were held in abeyance until their terms of service were up. They formed an important part of the labor force in New York and Philadelphia but not in Boston. Urban indentured servitude was never so debilitating and exploitative as in the early Chesapeake tobacco colonies, where most servants did not survive to breathe the air of freedom they sought, and only a few of those who completed their indentures matched legal freedom with freedom from want. Yet it is evident from the considerable number of suicides and the great number of runaways that the life of the servant-immigrant, who was typically between thirteen and twenty years old, was frequently miserable and often unbearable. . . .

Above slaves and indentured servants—bound laborers who occupied a kind of subbasement of society from which ascent into the main house was difficult or impossible—stood apprentices and hired servants. Apprentices were servants too, but they differed from indentured servants in serving in the locale where they were born, usually in a family known to their parents, and contracting out to another familial setting by consent of their parents or guardians. They were rarely bought and sold, as were indentured servants. Especially in Boston the apprentice system bolstered familial forms by training up the young in the families of friends and acquaintances who were usually coreligionists. In all the port towns the principal purpose of apprenticing was the same as it had been for generations in England—to educate the youth in the “arts and mysteries” of the various crafts, thus providing an adequate pool of skilled labor.

Free unskilled laborers occupied the next rank of society. In the preindustrial era they performed the essential raw labor associated with construction and shipping. Along the waterfront, they loaded and unloaded the ships and manned the vessels that provided the lifelines between the seaports of North America and the world beyond. Each of the northern port towns, even in the early stages of development, had hundreds of such laborers. They are perhaps the most elusive social group in early American history because they moved from port to port with far greater frequency than other urban dwellers, shifted occupations, died young, and, as the poorest members of the free white community, least often left behind traces of their lives on the tax lists or in land and probate records. Grouped with them in social status were common laborers who stayed on land. In the port towns, where house, wharf, road, and bridge construction was a major enterprise throughout the colonial years, they were the diggers of basement and wells, the

pavers of streets, the cutters and haulers of wood, and the carters of everything that needed moving. It is difficult to assess how large a proportion of the working force they represented, but of the 304 estates inventoried in Boston between 1685 and 1699, they constitute nearly one-fifth of the decedents. Together with apprentices, indentured servants, and slaves, these free laborers probably constituted as much as half the labor force at the end of the seventeenth century.

Artisans—known also as “tradesmen,” “mechanics,” “artificers,” and “leather apron men”—filled the wide social space between laborers and an upper-class elite. This is a group so large and diverse that historians have never quite been able to agree on how to define it in occupational or class terms. Most of them were self-employed, proudly so, and they included everyone from silversmiths and hatters to shoemakers, tailors, and mast and sailmakers. Within most of the occupational subdivisions a wide range of wealth and status existed. In part this reflected the age-old hierarchy within each craft, composed of apprentices, journeymen, and master craftsmen. At each step along the way the economic security and material rewards could normally be expected to rise, so that the range of wealth that can be observed in the tax lists for carpenters in Boston or clockmakers in New York reflects to some degree the age of the particular artisan and the acquisition of skills associated with his work. Age was by no means the only or even the most important factor, however. Stephen Coleman, a Philadelphia glover, died in 1699 with an estate valued at £580, including two houses, while John Simons, also a glover of about the same age, died in the same year with an estate of only £51. . . .

The opportunities of the late seventeenth-century urban artisan varied considerably within crafts but no more so than variations between occupational groups. A hierarchy of trades existed in all of the towns—after the Revolution this was sometimes symbolized by the marching order of the various crafts at public celebrations—and to some degree the success of individual mechanics can be predicted by the trade they followed. Everyone knew that artisans working with precious metals got ahead faster than those who worked at the cobbler’s bench and that house carpenters were far more likely to become property owners than tailors and weavers. Nonetheless, young men chose their careers far more with reference to that of their fathers—or their uncles, older brothers, or cousins—than to a rational calculation of future material rewards. . . . Such intergenerational artisan continuity was one more proof that urban dwellers who worked with their hands retained part of the traditional mentality which held that a decent subsistence or a slow inching forward was more the norm than the rapid aggrandizement of wealth.

Standing at the top of the urban pyramid were two groups, one distinguished by its high social status and the other by its wealth. The first of these was composed of the professionals—government officials, doctors, clergymen, schoolteachers, and, eventually, lawyers. Often they were rewarded more by the community’s respect than by material benefits. Boston, for example, paid its public school teachers only about £25 sterling per year in the 1690s and forty years later New York had only £30 sterling to spare for a teacher’s wages. . . . But nobody denied that these educated men performed vital functions in the community, and the fact that their wealth rarely proximated their prestige serves as a reminder

that parallel hierarchies of wealth, power, and prestige existed and did not precisely overlap.

Held in lower regard but dominating economic life were the seaport merchants, and, to a lesser degree, the shopkeepers, who often aspired to merchant status. These were the urban dwellers who controlled the lifelines between the seaports and the hinterland and between the ports and the outside world. Without these importers and exporters, wholesalers and retailers, builders of ships, wharves, and warehouses there could have been no commercial centers. It should come as no surprise that those who controlled mercantile endeavors quickly gained a disproportionate share of economic leverage in the urban centers of colonial life, not only in dominating the flow of marketable goods but also in their control of shipbuilding, credit facilities, and urban real estate. Political power to match their economic influence was established early in all the northern ports; how this power was used would become one of the most enduring issues of the eighteenth century. . . .

Within the upper-middle tier of urban society stood the prospering merchants and shopkeepers, a sprinkling of master craftsmen, and the widows of men who had left their wives securely situated at death. In Boston almost three-quarters of these persons passed on to their heirs substantial amounts of real estate, including wharves, shops, and warehouses, as well as land and houses. . . . Men who had achieved material success of this kind had mahogany furniture in the parlor instead of oak, slept in canopied beds with fine linen, ate from silver rather than wood or pewter, and owned imported clocks, books, and other accoutrements of the moderately affluent life. . . . In all of the port towns this group claimed hold of about 40 percent of the collective assets in their communities.

The top 10 percent of the wealthholders, who can loosely be designated as the economic elite, were almost all officeholders, merchants, and others closely associated with mercantile pursuits or the widows of such men. Among the thirty Boston decedents between 1685 and 1699 who occupied this uppermost rank, for example, there were nineteen merchants, four sea captains, who also usually acted as importers on their own, two officeholders, a distiller, house carpenter, brazier, butcher, miller, and minister. All but two of these men owned real estate, and most could boast of property worth £500 sterling or more. . . . Their Philadelphia counterparts were also mostly men involved in commerce. . . . In both towns, and also in New York, about 40 percent of the total taxable assets or inventoried wealth fell under the control of this wealthiest tenth—about the same percentage possessed by the next richest three-tenths of society.

We need not be surprised that the top tenth of society controlled 40 percent of the community's wealth and the bottom half possessed only about 10 percent. So it had been throughout history, especially in urban centers, where the division of material goods and property was almost always less even than in the countryside. It is likely, in fact, that the wealth of European towns in this period was maldistributed to a far greater degree. So long as the unequal division of wealth had proceeded only this far, it was of far less concern than the actual conditions of life and how they compared to what the previous generation had known. Laboring people had never controlled more than a tiny fraction of the community's total wealth and did not imagine that social relationships were deranged because

assets were disproportionately concentrated at the top of society. What mattered to them was that in some places in the world the laboring poor lived in abject misery while in others they knew a spare but decent existence.

In the American port towns of the 1690s life at the bottom compared favorably with conditions in any of the English, Irish, and Scottish towns from which urban dwellers or their parents had come. Mariners, laborers, and many of those at the lower levels of the artisanry labored long hours under unpleasant and often unhealthy conditions; and at the end of their lives they had little to show for their efforts by modern standards. But they did not starve or go unclothed and unhoused. They were far better off than their counterparts in the late seventeenth-century English towns, where unemployment and acute poverty were major problems and political economists were busily planning workhouses to sponge up the jobless poor and set them to hard labor that would relieve taxpayers of supporting them through the poor rates. The incidence of poverty, in fact, was extremely low and was confined for the most part to the widowed, disabled, and orphaned, who were decently cared for. Thoroughly Elizabethan in their attitudes to the poor, townspeople regarded the small number of indigents as wards of the community, whose members should collectively assume responsibility for those in distress. Little stigma was attached to being poor, for it was generally due to circumstances beyond the individual's control. If Widow Chambers in Boston was old, infirm, and without children to care for her, the selectmen saw to it that wood was delivered to her door during the winter months. . . . In Philadelphia the law until 1700 required the justices of the peace to see to the needs of the indigent. Within a social system fundamentally based on family and kinship, remedies for dealing with the community's unfortunates were familial in form. Most often, persons in need remained in their homes or in the homes of others and were given "out-relief" there—clothes, firewood, bread, and often small weekly cash payments. In all of the port towns poverty was not regarded as a social defect and a sense of social responsibility pervaded poor relief measures. . . .

If life at the bottom of northern seaport society put laboring people ahead of their European relatives, life at the top left the colonial economic elite far behind. Just as a subbasement for slaves and indentured servants had been added, the colonial structure lacked a tower full of glittering diamonds and gold. Even the richest merchants of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia cut a poor figure compared to the overseas traders of Bristol, Hull, Cork, Dublin, and Edinburgh. The point is important because the gap between rich and poor was one of those measures by which ordinary town dwellers and even upper-class leaders judged equity and virtue in their society. Nobody, at least at this time, questioned the right of the rich to their worldly goods. But too much wealth was suspect, especially in Boston and Philadelphia, where the Puritan notion that making money was legitimate only when profits were put to public uses and the Quaker emphasis on "plain living" subtly curbed the aggrandizement of large fortunes. Religious restraints on the aggressive accumulations of riches were strengthened by a pervasive secular feeling that transplanted Europeans were building a better kind of society in the New World, one where neither jewel-bedecked lords nor impoverished vassals would be known. There was no inconsistency between adherence to social hierarchy and disdain for too great a gap between rich and poor.

Hierarchy was best preserved from challenges, in fact, when the social spectrum did not include degrading indigency at the lower end and sumptuous wealth at the upper. . . .

All three port towns by the end of the seventeenth century had evolved into bustling entrepôts through which the lifeblood of their colonies flowed. As everywhere, the benefits of a commercial way of life were shared unequally among their members. But by European standards, which, after all, provided the American urban dwellers with their frame of reference, the relationships among the constituent parts of society functioned in a generally equitable fashion. Lower-class artisans and laborers might regard upper-class leaders as too inflexibly committed to the concept of an ordered and immobile society; and upper-class merchants and professionals might see dangerous leveling tendencies in lower-class pretensions to a more genteel manner of living. But most people took satisfaction in the fact that William Phips, a sheep farmer and ship's carpenter from Maine, could rise to the governorship of Massachusetts in 1692 and that Griffith Jones, a glover from County Surrey in England, could become mayor of Philadelphia in 1704. If the expectations of not every inhabitant of the port towns were fully met, there was at least a general sense that life was fulfilling in the northern English colonies and that the future was bright.

Colonial Black Communities and the Evolution of African-American Society

IRA BERLIN

Generally the importance of . . . slaves to the growth of northern cities increased during the eighteenth century. Urban slavery moved steadily away from the household to the docks, warehouses, and shops, as demonstrated by the growing disproportion of slave men in the urban North. Aside from those skills associated with the maritime trades, however, few slaves entered artisan work. Only a handful could be found in the carriage trades that enjoyed higher status and that offered greater opportunity for an independent livelihood and perhaps the chance to buy freedom.

In the cities as in the countryside, blacks tended to live and work in close proximity to whites. Northern slaves not only gained first-hand knowledge of their masters' world, but they also rubbed elbows with lower-class whites in taverns, cock fights, and fairs where poor people of varying status mingled. If urban life allowed slaves to meet more frequently and enjoy a larger degree of social autonomy than did slavery in the countryside, the cosmopolitan nature of cities speeded the transformation of Africans to Afro-Americans. Acculturation in the cities of the North was a matter of years, not generations.

For many blacks, the process of cultural transformation was well under way before they stepped off the boat. During the first century of American settlement, few blacks arrived in the North directly from Africa. Although American slavers

generally originated in the North, few gave priority to Northern ports. The markets to the south were simply too large and too lucrative. Slaves dribbled into the Northern colonies from the West Indies or the mainland South singly, in twos and threes, or by the score but rarely by the boatload. Some came on special order from merchants or farmers with connections to the West Indian trade. Others arrived on consignment, since few Northern merchants specialized in selling slaves. Many of these were the unsalable "refuse" (as traders contemptuously called them) of larger shipments. Northern slaveholders generally disliked these scourgings of the transatlantic trade who, the governor of Massachusetts observed, were "usually the worst servants they have"; they feared that the West Indian re-exports had records of recalcitrance and criminality as well as physical defects. In time, some masters may have come to prefer seasoned slaves because of their knowledge of English, familiarity with work routines, or resistance to New World diseases. But, whatever their preference, Northern colonies could not compete with the wealthier staple-producing colonies for prime African field hands. Before the 1740s, Africans appear to have arrived in the north only when a temporary glut made sale impossible in the West Indies and the mainland South. Even then they did not always remain in the North. When conditions in the plantation colonies changed, merchants re-exported them for a quick profit. The absence of direct importation during the early years and the slow, random, haphazard entry to West Indian creoles shaped the development of black culture in the Northern colonies. While the nature of the slave trade prevented the survival of tribal or even shipboard ties that figured so prominently in Afro-American life in the West Indies and the Lower South, it better prepared blacks to take advantage of the special circumstances of their captivity.

Newly arrived blacks, most already experienced in the New World and familiar with their proscribed status, turned Northern bondage to their advantage where they could. They quickly established a stable family life and, unlike newly imported Africans elsewhere on the continent, increased their numbers by natural means during the first generation. . . . The transplanted creoles also seized the opportunities provided by the complex Northern economy, the relatively close ties of master and slave, and, for many, the independence afforded by urban life. In New Amsterdam, for example, the diverse needs of the Dutch mercantile economy induced the West India Company, the largest slaveholder in the colony, to allow its slaves to live out and work on their own in return for a stipulated amount of labor and an annual tribute. "Half-freedom," as this system came to be called, enlarged black opportunities and allowed for the development of a strong black community. When the West India Company refused to make these privileges hereditary, "half-free" slaves organized and protested, demanding that they be allowed to pass their rights to their children. Failing that, New Amsterdam slaves pressed their masters in other ways to elevate their children's status. Some, hearing rumors that baptism meant freedom, tried to gain church membership. . . . Even after the conquering English abolished "half-freedom" and instituted a more rigorous system of racial servitude, blacks continued to use the leverage gained by their prominent role in the city's economy to set standards of treatment well above those in the plantation colonies. Into the eighteenth century, New York slaves informally enjoyed the rights of an earlier era, including the right to hold property of their own. "The Custome of this Country," bristled a frustrated New

From "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on Mainland British North America" by Ira Berlin, *American Historical Review* 85 (February, 1980), excerpted from pp. 44-64. Reprinted by permission of the author.

important, it established a framework for the development of black politics. In the places where Negro election day survived into the nineteenth century, its politics shaped the politics within the black community and merged with partisan divisions of American society. Slaves elsewhere in the New World also celebrated this holiday, but whites in the plantation colonies found the implications of role reversal too frightening to allow even symbolically. Northern whites, on the other hand, not only aided election day materially but sometimes joined in themselves. Still, white cooperation was an important but not the crucial element in the rise of Negro election day. Its origins in the 1740s and 1750s suggests how the entry of Africans reoriented Afro-American culture at a formative point in its development.

African acculturation in the Northern colonies at once incorporated blacks into American society and sharpened the memory of their African past and their desire to preserve it. While small numbers and close proximity to whites forced blacks to conform to the forms of the dominant Euro-American culture, the confidence of whites in their own hegemony allowed black slaves a good measure of autonomy. . . .

Unlike African acculturation in the Northern colonies, the transformation of Africans into Afro-Americans in the Carolina and Georgia lowcountry was a slow, halting process whose effects resonated differently within black society. While creolization created a unified Afro-American population in the North, it left lowcountry blacks deeply divided. . . .

One branch of black society took shape within the bounds of the region's cities and towns. If planters lived removed from most slaves, they maintained close, intimate relations with some. The masters' great wealth, transient life, and seasonal urban residence placed them in close contact with house servants who kept their estates, boatmen who carried messages and supplies back and forth to their plantations, and urban artisans who made city life not only possible but comfortable. In addition, coastal cities needed large numbers of workers to transport and process the plantation staples, to serve the hundreds of ships that annually visited the lowcountry, and to satisfy the planters' newly acquired taste for luxury goods. Blacks did most of this work. Throughout the eighteenth century they composed more than half the population of Charles Town and other lowcountry ports. Probably nothing arrived or left these cities without some black handling it. Black artisans also played a large role in urban life. Master craftsmen employed them in every variety of work. . . . Although most black artisans labored along the waterfront as shipwrights, ropemakers, and coopers, lowcountry blacks—unlike blacks in Northern cities—also entered the higher trades, working as gold beaters, silversmiths, and cabinetmakers. In addition, black women gained control over much of the marketing in the lowcountry ports, mediating between slave-grown produce in the countryside and urban consumption. White tradesmen and journeymen periodically protested against slave competition, but planters, master craftsmen, and urban consumers who benefited from black labor and services easily brushed aside these objections.

Mobile, often skilled, and occasionally literate, urban slaves understood the white world. They used their knowledge to improve their position within lowcountry society even while the condition of the mass of black people

deteriorated. . . . Many urban creoles not only retained the independence of the earlier years but enlarged upon it. They hired their own time, earned wages from "overwork," kept market stalls, and sometimes even opened shops. Some lived apart from their masters and rented houses of their own, paying their owners a portion of their earnings in return for *de facto* freedom. Such liberty enabled a few black people to keep their families intact and perhaps even accumulate property for themselves. The small black communities that developed below the Bluff in Savannah and in Charles Town's Neck confirm the growing independence of urban creoles.

The incongruous prosperity of urban bondsmen jarred whites. By hiring their own time, living apart from their masters, and controlling their own family life, these blacks forcibly and visibly claimed the white man's privileges. Perhaps no aspect of their behavior was as obvious and, hence, as galling as their elaborate dress. While plantation slaves—men and women—worked stripped to the waist wearing no more than loin cloths (thereby confirming the white man's image of savagery), urban slaves appropriated their masters' taste for fine clothes and often the clothes themselves. Lowcountry legislators enacted various sumptuary regulations to restrain the slaves' penchant for dressing above their station. The South Carolina Assembly once even considered prohibiting masters from giving their old clothes to their slaves. But hand-me-downs were clearly not the problem as long as slaves earned wages and had easy access to the urban marketplace. Frustrated by the realities of urban slavery, lawmakers passed and repassed the old regulations to little effect. On the eve of the Revolution, a Charles Town Grand Jury continued to bemoan the fact that the "Law for preventing the excessive and costly Apparel of Negroes and other Slaves in this province (especially in *Charles Town*) [was] not being put into Force."

Most of these privileged bondsmen appear to have been creoles with long experience in the New World. Although some Africans entered urban society, the language skills and the mastery of the complex interpersonal relations needed in the cities gave creoles a clear advantage over Africans in securing elevated positions within the growing urban enclaves. To be sure, their special status was far from "equal." No matter how essential their function or intimate their interaction, their relations with whites no longer smacked of the earlier "sawbuck equality." Instead, these relations might better be characterized as paternal, sometimes, literally so.

Increasingly during the eighteenth century, blacks gained privileged positions within lowcountry society as a result of intimate, usually sexual, relations with white slave masters. Like slaveholders everywhere, lowland planters assumed that sexual access to slave women was simply another of the master's prerogatives. Perhaps because their origin was West Indian or perhaps because their dual residence separated them from their white wives part of the year, white men established sexual liaisons with black women frequently and openly. Some white men and black women formed stable, long-lasting unions, legitimate in everything but law. More often than other slaveholders in continental British North America, lowcountry planters recognized and provided for their mulatto offspring, and, occasionally, extended legal freedom. South Carolina's small free Negro population, almost totally confined to Charles Town, was largely the

product of such relations. Light-skinned people of color enjoyed special standing in the lowcountry ports, as they did in the West Indies, and whites occasionally looked the other way when such creoles passed into the dominant caste. But even when the planters did not grant legal freedom, they usually assured the elevated standing of their mulatto scions by training them for artisan trades or placing them in household positions. If the countryside was "blackened" by African imports, Charles Town and the other lowcountry ports exhibited a melange of "colored" peoples.

✧ FURTHER READING

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CHAPTER

3

Commercialism and Urban Life in the New Nation, 1790–1860



Between 1790 and 1860 the United States experienced unprecedented urbanization, and cities became indispensable to the national economy. Whereas in 1790 only four cities—New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore—had populations over 10,000, by 1860 twenty-one cities contained populations of more than 40,000, and nine boasted over 100,000 residents. New York led with 814,000 people, but the urban network stretched across the continent to include interior cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, New Orleans, and Cincinnati and western cities including San Francisco. All these places, and countless small and middle-sized cities as well, developed environments that distinguished them from their surrounding rural areas and defined the preindustrial American city.

What did it mean for a community to be considered a city in this era? Historians interested in urban growth in the new nation have had to consider this question carefully in analyzing urban life at a time before cities existed in the form that we know them today. Several other questions flow out of the initial query: In what ways were there peculiarly "urban" institutions and problems? How did early cities differ in appearance from modern cities? Did they resemble modern cities in any ways? How did they organize their social and economic activities? What factors were likely to encourage or discourage growth?

✧ DOCUMENTS

The first three documents give different contemporary perspectives on what early American cities were like in their physical features, economic activities, and social relations. Michael Chevalier, the author of the first excerpt, was a Frenchman who visited the United States between 1833 and 1835 to investigate the construction of canals and railroads but also to see how the French might learn