Introduction

A 1700 engraving of New York City pictures a thriving British port in the midst of a period of rapid economic growth. The harbor bustles with activity. A great vessel, its sails full of wind, glides to join another already lying at anchor. Sailing among these massive seagoing vessels are smaller coastal craft busily carrying goods to and from the quays or perhaps bringing imports from surrounding colonies. The print portrays a vibrant yet orderly landscape; neatly arranged warehouses and countinghouses line the waterfront as tidy rows of homes stretch to the horizon. A serene hinterland fades into the background as a windmill, just visible on the right, suggests the burgeoning economic possibilities of the mid-Atlantic. A contemporary engraving of another English port, Bridgetown, Barbados, presents a similar if more densely populated scene. In this 1695 engraving, a score or more vessels crowd the Caribbean port’s carefully labeled wharfs and two large quays. Multistory structures line the shore, dominated by the great storehouses that front each wharf and suggest the economic success of this leading West Indian island as do the close to forty windmills processing sugarcane that are scattered in the surrounding cane fields.

On the surface, these prints present a British Atlantic composed of well-ordered colonial ports that function as nodes of Atlantic shipping. Metropolitan officials would have endorsed such depictions; they could imagine that these views of the ports’ orderliness reflected the
effectiveness of the regulatory apparatus they had constructed to contain Atlantic commerce. In these sanitized representations, as in the laws that directed imperial trade, colonial ports were governable places where British vessels, and only British vessels, were to deliver English goods in exchange for colonial produce. But if we were able to look closer at these places, to peer at the bills of lading the vessels carried, to examine their origins and cargoes, or to glance in on the wharves and merchants clustered in taverns and countinghouses, we would discover another landscape, this one much less structured and less amenable to metropolitan goals. Instead of well-regulated and accountable shipping, we would find individuals acting improvisationally in the pursuit of personal and colonial profit, undermining the quest for orderly commerce found in imperial thinking. Behind the regularity artists depicted lies another story, one about the porosity of commercial regulation, the informality and persistent illegality of exchanges in the British empire,
and the endurance of a culture of cross-national cooperation in the Atlantic that had been forged in the first decades of European settlement and still resonated a century later.

Until recently, the dominant narrative of British Atlantic development, like these port views, obscured the ad hoc cooperative reality of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century trade. Concerned principally with the task of explaining the simultaneous development of far-flung settlements, the imperial centers from which they emerged, and the empires they constituted, earlier work tended to center on bilateral connections between colony and metropole. As scholars have shifted direction, increasingly placing the Atlantic Ocean itself, as opposed to European empires, at the center of their analysis, they have discovered the extent to which culture, goods, and entrepreneurial activities flowed across imperial boundaries in a more integrated circum-Atlantic economy than previously perceived.

Collectively, recent work has demonstrated that the perspectives of merchants and planters operating in the seventeenth-century Atlantic were framed not only by European empire building and the competition that resulted, but also by their cross-national connections to one another. This new scholarship has turned our emphasis away from an approach that centers on distinct empires to one that recognizes how settlers built transnational communities around the Atlantic basin as a strategy for commercial success. It has become clear that to fully describe the development of the British Atlantic colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries it is necessary to understand them as settlers did, as part of a larger Atlantic community. Much of the recent work on commercial “border crossing,” however, describes the activities of
distinctive individuals noted for their transnational and entrepreneurial natures. Such a focus has significantly broadened our understanding of the fortunes of individual traders and the complex networks and identities they created but has yet to be integrated into a larger understanding of the economic development of the British Atlantic.  

*Empire at the Periphery* bridges these two bodies of scholarship that, on the one hand, explain the rise of British Atlantic colonies within an empire struggling to fashion its authority institutionally and, on the other, detail the transnational alliances forged in everyday commerce. Primarily focusing on the key transformative period in England’s (and then Britain’s after the Act of Union in 1707) relationship with its colonies—the years between 1624 and 1713—this work examines how the interimperial colonial communities of the seventeenth century shaped British efforts to create a state-centered and exclusive empire. The English Civil War, a regicide, three “revolutions,” and multiple wars with both the Dutch and French required a bellicose government, and overwhelmingly English state builders realized that it was only by harnessing the nation’s commercial power (and particularly that of its colonies) that England could meet these challenges. Simultaneously, this new state could further encourage and expand colonial development. Never coherent, sometimes contradictory, and always uneven, seventeenth-century English colonial policy was characterized by the steady efforts of a constellation of interests including courtiers, Parliament, and the “new merchants,” to make the Atlantic colonies productive for the rising English state. Using trade laws, new excises, customs reform, administrative reorganization, the navy, and warfare, English authorities worked to transform colonies that were used to self-determination into a more integrated and mercantilist empire.  

The major obstacle England faced in harnessing colonial commerce was the prominent role that Dutch merchants played in the carrying trade of overseas English (as well as French and Spanish) colonies. Arriving first in the Atlantic to prey on Spanish shipping, by the 1640s Dutch merchants girded by the United Province’s strong financial and economic position transferred the success they found in northern European and Baltic trades to the Atlantic, supplying manufactured goods to a wide constellation of colonies in exchange for colonial commodities which they carried to the Dutch Republic. This dominance brought wealth to Dutch burghers already reaping the benefits of the East India trade even as it frustrated the hopes of mercantilists in Spain, Portugal, France, and above all, in England. In the colonies, Dutch traders were
almost universally welcomed not only because they brought needed trade, but also because they constituted another commercial option for often struggling settlers. Those colonists living in the newly planted English colonies of the early seventeenth century were no exception; Dutch traders frequented each of these places almost from their beginning. From the British metropolitan perspective, colonists’ trade with the Dutch both made their settlements less beneficial to the emerging English empire and created a distinct colonial culture that threatened to undermine larger national goals. As Cromwell, the Stuarts, and William III would find, however, removing the Dutch and incorporating the English colonies’ trade fully within the empire would not be as simple as conquering Dutch colonies (of which there were few) and passing restrictive laws. Instead, it would require changing the commercial habits and culture of colonists. That is, officials could not extend their fiscal-military state across the Atlantic until locals eschewed their cross-national, flexible origins and chose to conform to new imperial standards. The years between 1624 and 1713 were distinguished, therefore, both by new expressions of state power and by the greater realization that mercantilism rested on individual behavior. It would be the willingness of colonists to abandon an earlier cross-national Atlantic community and accept membership in the British empire, presumably on the same terms as those in the metropole, that would ultimately make a mercantilist empire possible.

This book recaptures the process by which a new idea of an exclusive British empire displaced the seventeenth century’s interimperial Atlantic community, focusing on the experience of colonists living in three specific places—New York, Barbados, and the English Leeward Islands—who had particularly important connections to Dutch traders. Concentrating on the commercial experience of these individuals, this book investigates how colonists maintained and adapted their extant commercial practices to outside efforts to tame them by asking: Why did British colonists trade with Dutch merchants? What goods did they exchange? How did this trade occur? How did these patterns change over time? What was the impact of commercial regulations on Anglo-Dutch exchange? How did interimperial exchange shape the economic habits of British colonies? And finally, when and why did colonists shift away from Dutch trade?

I argue that, between 1624 and 1713, colonists chose to live in an entangled Atlantic in which pursuing Dutch trade was a regular and important part of their commercial system. The fluid, flexible,
transnational, and often illicit character of early British trade both provided material benefit to fragile colonies and also convinced colonists that cross-national trade was the best route to colonial economic success. Over time, colonists’ beneficial experience with foreign trade created a commercial culture that clashed with metropolitan attempts to confine trade to imperial channels. Ultimately Anglo-Dutch trade became less important for colonists, and, looking back from the perspective of the late eighteenth-century British empire, it is easy to miss what many have considered a brief and aberrant set of episodes in Atlantic history. To do this, however, is to overlook a rich story. For it is only by examining the way that an exclusive commercial empire replaced a more inclusive one and the reasons for this change that we can recapture the legacy of the earlier era and its importance in understanding how the Atlantic world developed. Government policies alone did not displace the Dutch from their prominent position in English colonies’ carrying trades and thus their importance for those emerging places. Instead, local economic conditions, patterns of migration, commodity prices and transnational credit, international developments, and the ways colonists responded to all of these developments were equally responsible. Explicating these early colonists’ actions helps reveal that the incorporation of far-flung territories into the British empire was not only the result of economic development and expanding governmental control, but was also a product of colonists’ choosing to more fully integrate themselves into the empire; in the process, they gave shape to the British empire.

Many historians of the British Atlantic have acknowledged the complex, confusing, and multinational nature of seventeenth-century colonies, particularly where empires overlapped in such places as the Caribbean and New Netherland/New York. In general, though, most have seen this period (usually restricted to 1620–60) as a short, atypical interlude in the gradual but steady process of empire building in which colonies became more “British” over time. Intent to explain the origins of the integrated mercantilist British imperial economy of the eighteenth century, these scholars have tended to emphasize how certain institutions and merchant networks on both sides of the Atlantic linked colony to metropole, facilitated greater integration of colonists into the imperial project, and thus laid the basis for the maturing eighteenth-century empire. Growing imperial infrastructure, colonial linkages to Britain, and emerging British identity are important to understanding how the empire grew, but also significant were the many strategies colonists deployed as they sought colonial success. Their thousands of individual, now mostly invisible, commercial
decisions made over a century helped render the British colonies viable. These efforts entailed the construction of a variety of commercial connections that both extended back to contacts in the British Isles and tied them to foreign traders throughout the Atlantic. Only by evaluating how the merchants and state builders of London promoted the commercial, financial, and legal institutions of empire, and how colonists chose to operate within or outside of that framework can we understand the crafting of the British Atlantic empire in the seventeenth century.

When assessing colonists’ decisions to trade with the Dutch during what was often a period of active warfare between the empires, it is tempting to see their behavior as unpatriotic or disloyal. Remarkably, however, few people in England saw it this way. Certainly for many in government there was little tolerance for colonists’ collaboration with the Dutch, but illegal trade was more often seen as a product of self-interest than of traitorous intent, even when popular and political rhetoric turned sharply against the Dutch in the 1660s and 1670s. At the same time, colonists usually did not consider their cross-national alliances as detrimental to imperial interests. As scholars of English history have recently shown, cosmopolitanism was engrained in early Englishmen who were able to adhere to narrowly English definitions of self, while at the same time holding broader (and sometimes conflicting) identities that placed them in a multinational Atlantic. As they saw it, pursuing Dutch trade was not contrary to larger English aims but was compatible with them. Understanding this cultural conceit is important because it shows that this period was a significant and distinctive phase of colonial economic development that ended only when colonists decided it no longer fit their needs. That this transition took a century to unfold indicates the power of an earlier, multiethnic, multi-imperial world and highlights another dimension to the origins of the British Atlantic empire.

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This study takes the colony as its basic unit of analysis, arguing that specific local factors, especially those relating to economic makeup and location, were central in shaping interimperial networks and determining how colonists adapted to new British laws and policies. At the same time, though, these places were woven into a larger Atlantic world in which flows of goods, peoples, and ideas crossed imperial boundaries to profoundly influence the individual makeup of colonies and the empires to which they belonged. Aiming to balance the local and the Atlantic,
this work employs a comparative framework. Founded during a ten-year period beginning in 1624, New York, Barbados, and the Leeward Islands all struggled to achieve stability during their first generations. The government officials; merchants, both Christian and Jewish; servants of many ethnic origins; and both free and enslaved Africans who populated these colonies faced persistent challenges of acquiring adequate supplies, cultivating and exporting viable staples, and protecting themselves from indigenous peoples and foreign empires. The political and economic weaknesses that all three places faced spurred interimperial trade, yet each location also retained particular characteristics that shaped its development. These differences allow us to gauge the range of circumstances that made interimperial trade necessary and profitable as well as the varied consequences of reaching out across imperial boundaries.

New York’s European population was more culturally diverse than the mostly British European population of the Leeward Islands and Barbados. Before the conquest in 1664, New Amsterdam had a vibrant community of Dutch merchants already engaged in both intercolonial and transatlantic commerce. The arrival of English authority and migrants required the layering of a new population over the existing Dutch community; English merchants and government officials had to integrate themselves with the extant Dutch commercial culture. The situation was different in Barbados and the Leeward Islands. These settlements were founded by the English within a few years of one another and were therefore without a preexisting commercial culture.

Beyond population, the colonies’ positions as islands or as part of a continental land mass also helped determine the extent and content of interimperial exchange. Foreign colonies surrounded the Leeward Islands and were near Barbados so that islanders from different states were in close proximity to one another. Among the most important trading centers in the Caribbean were the Dutch colonies of St. Eustatius (in the Lesser Antilles) and Curaçao (just off the northwest coast of Venezuela), and the immediacy of these Dutch shipping centers provided opportunities for cross-national exchange. Like those in the Caribbean, merchants in New Amsterdam, then New York, engaged in trade with surrounding colonies, but their neighbors were mostly English—on Long Island, in New England, along the Delaware River, and in the Chesapeake. Moreover, New Yorkers were more distant from Dutch entrepôts than were settlers in the Caribbean. Finally, differences in the nature of colonial economies meant that each location had a different need for interimperial commerce. As colonies centered around the export of tropical
commodities, Barbados and the Leeward Islands depended upon European markets for their production, though the quicker transition to sugar in Barbados meant that Barbadians had a different relationship with Dutch traders than did the mostly tobacco-producing planters of the Leeward Islands. Meanwhile, by midcentury, New York was more economically diverse. Colonists in this mid-Atlantic settlement sent furs and naval stores directly to Europe but also benefited from trade with other Atlantic colonies. Despite the differences in each region’s export market, both continued to depend on European manufactured goods for colonists’ consumption. Varying social makeups, the colonies’ locations, internal economies, and the organization of export trades provide the opportunity to examine how a range of factors influenced relationships between British colonists and Dutch merchants. In the end, the common demand for Dutch trade by colonists in both locations was not merely a result of a particular ethnic bond or a specific staple crop, though these certainly shaped cross-national ties, but rather was the result of their common experience at the edge of a fragile empire.

Organized chronologically, this work moves from the founding of the colonies through the first decades of the eighteenth century. Because of the scattered and incomplete nature of my evidence, however, I have, when appropriate, combined examples from different time periods. For example, when discussing the smuggling techniques that Caribbean merchants employed in the 1660s and 1670s, I have occasionally drawn examples from the decades before and after these dates.

The first chapter introduces New Amsterdam, the Leeward Islands, and Barbados and describes the earliest interactions between English and Dutch adventurers in these places. Located far from the seat of power in a dangerous, chaotic, and tenuous Atlantic, the settlers who built their plantations and businesses in Barbados and the Leeward Islands discovered soon after their arrival in the 1620s that they could not rely on metropolitan connections alone to advance their settlements. Colonists eager for trade quickly learned to build intraperimeral relationships with other English settlements, but they also formed advantageous commercial ties with colonists from other empires, most notably Dutch traders. Predisposed toward Dutch collaboration because of decades of military, political, and cultural ties at home, driven by the fragility of their nascent settlements, and attracted by the experience and skills of Dutch merchants already trading there, English colonists incorporated these foreigners into their regular commerce in the first decades of settlement.

Over time, this trade evolved. In the Caribbean, merchants and
planters organized their economies around the export of tobacco and the importation of slave labor. Dutch merchants actively participated in this expansion, offering slaves, credit, and supplies in return for tobacco. During these years, English Leeward Islanders produced tobacco superior to that grown by planters in Barbados, generating the most Dutch attention. Meanwhile, in New Amsterdam, Dutch traders established a strategically placed base from which they could organize trade with Native Americans along the Hudson and Connecticut river valleys and with English colonies already established in New England and the Chesapeake. Largely eschewing imperial borders, they established a tradition of pursuing cross-national trade, a practice that endured after the English conquest. By 1650, Dutch traders had established themselves at the center of the carrying trade throughout the region, weaving English, as well as Spanish, French, and Swedish colonies into their commercial networks as they had already done in northern Europe.

As British West Indians learned to cultivate tobacco, and soon sugar, they maintained their interimperial contacts, modifying them to fit new economic and regulatory conditions for as they started to create wealth, they became more attractive to merchants and policy makers across the Atlantic. Determined to capture the profits from now productive settlements and spurred by those like Thomas Mun who argued that England should not be “constantly embracing the Netherlanders as our best Friends and Allies; when in truth . . . there are no people in Christendome who do more [to] undermine, hurt, and eclipse us daily in our Navigation and Trades,” English officials enacted mercantilist laws designed to end foreign trade in the colonies and launched three wars against the Dutch Republic.11

Ultimately, these efforts would impact colonists’ commerce, but for many decades Anglo-Dutch trade thrived on new challenges and opportunities for collaboration that were introduced in the 1640s as the price of tobacco fell, as planters in Barbados turned to sugar, and as the English Civil War consumed England. In New Netherland, the greatest challenge to stable commerce was the arrival of English rule in 1664. The conquest created a crisis for many settlers, disrupting commercial networks that they had relied upon for supplies of manufactured goods and that had provided them markets for reexports. With British trade not yet sufficient to meet their needs (as their fellow colonists in the Caribbean well knew), New Yorkers relied upon their preexisting ties to preserve trade to the Dutch Republic as British officials worked to incorporate the colony into the British empire. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on these parallel
stories, concentrating on how colonists, conditioned by their relative stability, their economic organization, and their location, adapted Anglo-Dutch trade to these new circumstances. Though exchanges with Dutch merchants never constituted the majority of colonial trade at midcentury, they were a part of daily life, with colonists continuing to turn to Dutchmen as trading partners both in times of relative stability and to supplement other sources of trade and credit in times of crisis. Colonists’ reluctance to abandon Dutch ties testifies to their continued vitality and indicates how, at the periphery, colonial needs and habits often overrode imperial policies. By the late 1660s, it was becoming clear that the creation of a uniform empire and the besting of Dutch rivals had as much to do with transforming the commercial culture of the colonies as it did with removing Dutch traders and ships from the colonies. For now, however, closing off Dutch trade to British subjects remained elusive.

Chapters 4 and 5 trace changes in interimperial trade over the course of the second half of the seventeenth century and analyze how metropolitan policies affected colonists’ economic decisions but did not eliminate Dutch trade. These chapters include a discussion of England’s assertion of imperial authority, the continued attractiveness of interimperial commerce for colonists, and the kinds of goods or services they desired. Important for these chapters is analyzing how commercial patterns varied between the Caribbean and New York City up until the Glorious Revolution in 1689. That attempts to displace the Dutch had sporadic success depending upon each colony’s economic and demographic makeup reveals that efforts to remake the English Atlantic depended as much on local decisions and developments as they did on a coherent vision flowing from England.

The final chapter traces the evolution of interimperial trade during the wars that plagued European empires almost without interruption from 1689 to 1713. The War of the League of Augsburg (1689–97) and the War of Spanish Succession (1702–13) disrupted both transatlantic trade and regulatory efforts, prompting colonists in both the Caribbean and New York to take the initiative in directing Anglo-Dutch trade, shifting the organization and management of interimperial trade to the Western Hemisphere. As they played an increasingly prominent role in guiding interimperial exchange, British West Indians and New Yorkers called on the portfolio of techniques they had developed in the previous century and added new ones, such as the increased use of the Dutch islands of Curaçao and St. Eustatius and Danish St. Thomas as intra-Caribbean transfer points. As both Barbados and the Leeward Islands continued to
mature and as ongoing warfare created scarcities in the Caribbean, colo-

nists there found they were able to trade a more diverse array of goods
to English, French, and Danish islands, a pattern of commerce that New
York City merchants were also perfecting in the same years. In short,
this period witnessed diminishing ties to transatlantic Dutch credit and
goods, and a thickening of Western Hemispheric connections within
the empire. Traders in New York City and the Caribbean were reach-
ing a point of sufficient stability to begin opening new opportunities for
themselves and the empire by constructing a linked, though often still
interimperial, economy.

When relative peace came to the Atlantic in 1713, colonists found that
their situation had changed dramatically. Success in this European war
gave significant shape to Great Britain’s eighteenth-century territorial
and commercial empire and brought an end to the chaotic first century
of Atlantic empire building. With more-developed economies, with bet-
ter access to more capable British traders, and with Dutch merchants
weakened by internal economic instability in the United Provinces no
longer in a dominant competitive position, many colonists shifted their
orientation and decided they had more to gain from metropolitan pro-
tection than from cross-national trade. This transition in thinking was
hastened by the ongoing migration of Britons to the Caribbean and New
York and the maturation of a new generation of colonists with scanty ties
to the multinational culture of earlier decades. An epilogue traces these
new arrivals and the shifting interests that encouraged colonists to more
fully embrace metropolitan articulations of empire, resulting in their ac-
tive pursuit of trade policies devoted to augmenting an exclusive empire,
most notably the Molasses Act of 1733. Some British colonists continued
to seek Dutch trade through the eighteenth century, but on balance the
colonial economic culture now favored complicity with British imperial
goals.

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The regulations that made some interimperial commerce illegal and
some of it permissible were in constant flux throughout the period cov-
ered by this work. Depending on cargo, destination, ship registration,
crew makeup, and official licensure, some colonists’ trade with other
nations was permitted and some was not. Though complex, this confu-
sion is important insofar as it indicates why colonists smuggled. Not in-
spired by an inherent desire to flout imperial restrictions, most colonists
instead pursued illicit trade because those exchanges were their habit. By the mid-seventeenth century, commerce between English and Dutch peoples in the colonies was well established; it was English law that had changed. From their viewpoint, colonists trading with the Dutch did not usually see smuggling as a crime against “the laws of nature,” but as necessary to maintain established patterns of commerce. As Adam Smith remarked, the smuggler was “in every respect, an excellent citizen, had not the laws of his country made that a crime which nature never meant to be so.”

Because we have only fragmentary records of illicit trade, scholars will never be able to discover the precise amount of Anglo-Dutch trade in the colonies. Where possible, I have offered quantities of goods traded to the Dutch or numbers of ships engaged in interimperial trade, but I do not intend these statistics to be exhaustive. We can state with certainty only that the quantities of goods British colonists exchanged with Dutch traders contributed significantly to the stabilizing of British colonies in the early years, but in quantity they remained a relatively small proportion of all British colonial commerce. Nevertheless, I hope this book will show that the value of interimperial trade was not simply in its quantities; the absolute value may be beside the point. Even if the total value could be determined, it would not help to answer the question of why colonists participated in this trade and what importance they placed on it. Colonists went to great lengths and took significant risks to trade with Dutch merchants for more than a century, revealing that they believed these ties to be valuable. At the same time, the vast quantity of resources and effort imperial officials expended to halt the Dutch trade reveals how important administrators considered it. Just as the statistical measurement of interimperial trade is virtually impossible, the details of the merchants involved and specific voyages in the Caribbean are so fragmentary that it is rarely possible to follow the career of any one trader or even a group of merchants. In New York City, records are better and the portions of this work concerning that port can be more specific about individual life paths. In general, though, evidence is still scanty, and thus those examples we can reconstruct must stand in for the experiences of others. Nevertheless, as the colonies’ commercial culture was made by hundreds of individual decisions, I have tried to illustrate with as much detail as possible those examples we do have. As such, each chapter begins with a vignette chosen to illustrate the chapter’s themes and to emphasize how powerful individual choices were in determining how the British empire evolved.
The desire to pursue cross-national trade, and to evade laws to do so, knit colonists together in their quest for individual and, by extension, colonial profits. Colonists viewed interimperial trade as both one of the many commercial options available to them and as a necessity when there were no alternatives. Concerned with personal and local survival and success, these individuals, supported by governors and colonial councils and assemblies, pursued the most advantageous of the options available to them, alternatively obeying, manipulating, and violating imperial policy dependent on each distinct circumstance. What these personal decisions created in the aggregate was the growing belief that local interests diverged from imperial concerns and that they, as locals, best understood the commercial needs and opportunities of their colonies. Thousands of miles from home and struggling to prosper, colonists understood European expansion differently than did subjects and rulers in the metropole. Where British officials and merchants saw distinct empires competing for the world’s wealth, colonists often saw an entangled Atlantic community striving to succeed. Recovering this colonial way of seeing and the interimperial networks British colonists constructed reveals how local articulations of empire helped create the British Atlantic.
PART ONE

BEGINNINGS, 1620–1659