

MERCHANTS AND COMMERCE IN FALMOUTH (1740-1775)

by Edwin A. Churchill

From 1715 to the Revolution, Falmouth (now Portland), Maine grew from a single family to one of the important sea-ports in colonial America. Phenomenal as this development seems, certain factors were present which would ultimately limit that expansion. Both the port's rapid growth and its limitation can be related to three major elements - the geography, hinterland, and local commercial leaders.

Falmouth's geography was a mixed blessing. Situated far north of most Atlantic settlements, it did not have the advantages of such ports as Boston and New York which were much nearer the centers of population, the rich agricultural regions of eastern America, and the West Indies. Because of these shortcomings, most trans-Atlantic merchants preferred to trade with more southerly colonies. On the other hand, the port was blessed with the best natural harbor on the eastern seaboard. Snuggled in the lap of Casco Bay, it was protected from the high seas by a triple line of islands rimming the Bay. The wharves were but three and one-half miles from the ocean and could be approached by a straight deep channel which, because of high tides, seldom froze. Thus, any vessels trading there had the best natural protection and loading conditions available in the colonies. (1)

Likewise, Falmouth's hinterland had good and bad features. The rugged climate and thin, rocky soil made agriculture a marginal occupation. A farmer was lucky to raise enough food for his family and a few animals; he rarely had a surplus. Conversely, the excellent stands of pine, fir and hardwood offered easily accessible products with a steady market. The value of this trade was noted by the community's First Parish minister Reverend Thomas Smith who testified on January 22, 1765 that, "the ships and other vessels loading here are a wonderful benefit to us. They take off vast quantities of timber, masts, oar-rafters, boards &c." (2) During the winter, some farmers supplemented their incomes by carving out staves, splitting shingles, and cutting cords of firewood to exchange in town for needed supplies. However, a fairly large number of individuals simply turned from the unpromising farms to the more reliable lumbering trade for their livelihood. This further undermined the already deficient agricultural base and Falmouth citizens often found themselves facing severe food shortages. The harsh farming conditions also had the negative

effect of keeping the population low, thereby offering the seaport a limited import market. Throughout the colonial period, the commercial growth of Falmouth was hindered by a lack of local customers, forcing the community's merchants to search far for a sufficient clientele.

In the final analysis though, the success or failure of Falmouth rested upon the local merchants who had to keep the commerce flowing. They had to procure, load, and ship exportable products, and buy, receive and distribute needed import commodities. They had to be knowledgeable of the market situation in both local and distant ports in order to make correct trading decisions. And, they had to capitalize on the port's strong points and overcome its disadvantages. From all evidence it appears that they were generally able to fulfill these requirements during the three and a half decades considered in this essay.

The achievements of these men rested, in large part, upon their own characters and upon the activities in which they engaged themselves. When one looks at the records of the port's leading commercial figures, such as Enoch Freeman, Ephraim Jones, and the Waite brothers (all merchants greatly responsible for Falmouth's growth) several features emerge which go far in explaining their success. First, as a group, they were generally meticulous but flexible managers. They kept detailed records with many using double-entry bookkeeping, and entered everything in their ledgers down to a two pence bit of ribbon. Several skillfully used contacts in Boston and elsewhere to secure some extra business, and a few, such as Jones, built up amazingly complex operations. He had customers and suppliers from Halifax to Barbados and could take advantage of trade opportunities in any of the American colonies. (3)

Second, the Falmouth merchants were willing to take risks in order to increase profits and reduce expenses. Many owned their own vessels, which greatly decreased transportation costs, but on the other hand added the possibility of losing a craft as well as a cargo in case of shipwreck. That the loss could be substantial was fully illustrated when on December 18, 1765, a local vessel and cargo valued at £12,000 went down at sea. Furthermore, few covered their crafts with insurance, apparently to save money, deciding instead to take a chance on the sea and the weather. And with the coming of the Revolution, a number of the community's commercial leaders were actively outfitting privateers, a long-odds business by any standard. (4)

A third and crucial quality of these men was their willingness to work at their businesses. They managed all of their import and export operations, handled a good deal of correspon-

dence, and kept careful records. Also, most took care of the bulk of the retail selling in their own stores, and so were in contact with every phase of their organizations.

Besides fulfilling business roles, the merchants of Falmouth were also the community's economic, social, and, in large, political elite. Economically, they had no strong competitors. They were, for example, the chief landowners in town. Samuel Waldo and his son Francis, both merchants, held large sections of land in the area, as did such commercial leaders as the Freemans, Prebles and Deerings. The merchants also held most of the commercial property in town. Deacon Milk probably owned the largest plot. It extended from the center of the Falmouth Neck to the low water mark of the commercial side of the peninsula, a very handsome estate. The Bangs, Deerings, Frosts and Ingrahams were other such property holders. (5)

The merchants also owned a fair number of the community's lumber mills, with Colonel Westbrook, the Moodys, Moses Pearson, Samuel Waldo and others setting up sawing establishments as early as the 1830's. The mills provided an easy and relatively inexpensive means for obtaining needed lumber exports, and several of the merchants did a substantial business. For example, on May 20, 1745, Samuel Waldo shipped from his Presumpscot mill, boards worth £363.6s; on July 29, he exported another load worth £383.6s.7d. (6)

Finally, the merchants held property in the form of vessels and merchandise. So, overall, all mercantile and much of the industrial holdings of the community were in the hands of the commercial leaders.

Socially, the merchants formed the port's elite along with the lawyers, doctors, and "right" ministers. Very conscious of their status, they attempted in several ways to separate themselves from the mass and to associate primarily with their peers. They actually segregated themselves from the lesser folk by buying and building their homes close together. For example, the Coffins, Mayos, Sanfords and Noyes all lived along King Street, the most exclusive street in town. Also, the merchants continually met with each other. Reverend Smith often mentioned social gatherings among such individuals as Jedediah Preble, Samuel Waldo, Enoch Moody, Alexander Ross and George Tate. And Reverend Deane's diary entry on March 9, 1783 was typical of many before and after the Revolution: "Sabbath, Dr. Watts, W. Storer, Mr. Davis, I. Titcomb here in the evening." (7)

The merchants further preserved their elite position through marriages, with sons and daughters of merchants, lawyers,

doctors and ministers frequently marrying one another. Such marriages secured their exclusive status and combined fortunes, thus strengthening the solid estates and stabilizing shaky holdings. A good example of these intra-class matches is provided by the Codman family. In but a couple generations, Codman men had wedded two merchants' and a minister's daughter, and the Codman girls had married themselves to merchants in at least four instances. The same pattern appeared with the Ilsley family among others. (8)

The merchants not only separated themselves from the generality but made sure their separateness was made visible through dress. The commercial leaders (when not working) wore expensive, exclusive clothes beyond the means of and socially taboo for lesser townsmen. They would dress in purple and fine linen, elaborately embroidered waistcoats, small clothes of buckskin, and a generous amount of ruffles. They then topped off their outfits with bush wigs and cocked hats. Their wives and children were also attired just as elaborately and the ladies were very conscious of current London fashions. (9)

The Falmouth merchants were deeply involved in the political activities of the community as well, serving in numerous offices. For example, before the Revolution, collected records indicate that local merchants served approximately half of the selectman terms in the town. Furthermore, members of the mercantile class held other offices as well including town clerk, town treasurer, General Court representative, various judicial posts, registers of deeds, and military positions. The Freemans, Deerings, Foxes, Prebles, Ilsleys and Waites were just a few of the major politically active merchant families in Falmouth. (10)

There is little doubt that the Falmouth merchants played significant roles in various aspects of the community. Still, in the final analysis, their greatest contribution was tied directly with their commercial activities for they played a basic part in establishing and maintaining the port's total economy. As this was the situation, it would seem advantageous to look at the commercial activities of these men. Several questions can easily be raised. Just what did these men export and import? How did they procure the local products to ship out, and distribute goods which they had brought in from the outside? And what were some of the things they did to keep the whole system operating?

Looking to exports first, it soon becomes obvious that Falmouth's considerable timber resources provided almost all of the merchants' outgoing cargoes. Probably most important of these were the tall white pines surrounding the community which

not only offered the port an ideal export but played a significant role in the fortunes of the British Empire. From these stately trees were hewn the masts, spars, and bowsprits necessary for the great Imperial warships. The importance of these New World masts was their size, as one could serve as a major mast of the largest warships, and shipwrights could avoid the weaker, spliced, made-masts. The English were impressed early with the large New England pines and by the end of the seventeenth century were sending many to British naval yards. At first, New Hampshire was the center of activity but in 1727 Thomas Westbrook, working for Royal Mast Agent and merchant Samuel Waldo, moved to Falmouth and began bringing the big sticks out of the forests around Casco Bay. From this start the community's activity grew until by the 1760's Falmouth had become the essential colonial supplier of the giant pines so important for His Majesty's Navy. In the years 1768-1772 alone, Falmouth shipped out 1046 masts to Britain averaging 3.74 tons apiece. The nearest competitor, Piscataqua exported but 754 masts weighing only .74 tons each. In fact, in those four years Falmouth sent out about 3 1/2 times more tons of masts than did Piscataqua, Halifax, Salem-Marblehead, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and the Lower James River area combined. (11) Usually the masts were brought into Falmouth by townspeople, who scouted out, cut down, and transported them to the port. Although a few colonists were able to sell masts cut on private lands for a high price, most of the territory, and consequently the big trees, were part of the Crown lands. Thus the agents could get local contractors to bring out the masts for a rather small fee and the contractors in turn hired day laborers for trifling wages. Most of the profit ended up in the pockets of the British and a few select Falmouth merchants rather than with any large number of colonists, a point which caused some bitterness on the part of many local inhabitants. (12)

The importance of this mast trade was impressively demonstrated when the port cut off the supply of the big pines to England in 1775. By 1778, the Royal Navy reserves were exhausted and when the British sent out a fleet under Admiral Byron in pursuit of French Admiral D'Estaing who was attempting to supply the Revolutionaries, Byron had to sail with aged, inflexible masts. A storm in the mid-Atlantic snapped the brittle wood bringing yards, sails, and rigging crashing to the decks and left the British fleet scattered and fully occupied in reaching friendly ports for repairs. D'Estaing was able to sail on to the rebels unchallenged. (13) Thus it would seem that by refusing the Royal Navy badly needed masts, Falmouth played a

definite part in frustrating British efforts to stop French reinforcements sent to the colonists, a rather significant role in the American fight for independence.

It should be noted that not all mast business was carried on with the Royal Navy and British merchants, as several of the colonists also sold to their neighbors, along the coast, and even in the West Indies. Still, most of the trade was with England.

Once the giant pines were brought into Falmouth (no easy chore), they still had to be transported to the Mother Country. This was usually done in extra large, specially built mast ships which had big loading portals in the rear and carried 50 to 100 masts plus a large number of spars and bowsprits. Boards, planking, and timber filled the empty spaces, and once loaded, the large ships slipped out of the harbor and set a course Eastward. (14)

Whereas the loaded ships sailed directly to England, there is evidence that they traveled two different routes on their way to Falmouth. The larger vessels (about 200 tons) sailed directly to the port and were probably in ballast. Upon arrival they were loaded with masts and lumber, and then returned home. There were a number of reasons for using these ships on one-way carries. Because of their size, deep holds and special construction, loading and unloading ordinary cargo would have been both difficult and slow. Waiting at English piers for the collection of the extra cargo needed to provide these vessels with full loads on their way to America would have kept them at anchor just that much longer. In the long run, it saved both time and expense to run empty to Falmouth, quickly fill the large holds and sail back to England and unloaded, thus cutting turnabout time significantly.

However, smaller vessels first went to Boston, unloaded their cargoes, and then sailed to Falmouth. Averaging 100 tons, they could be loaded and unloaded more quickly and easily. Also, basic overhead costs and smaller cargo loads made one-way carries prohibitively expensive. They went to Boston rather than Falmouth because it offered them a better market. (15)

England was also Falmouth's largest wood products customer, buying large quantities of planks, boards, timbers, and staves. In 1768, for instance, the port sent Britain about 4.1 million feet of lumber, 150 thousand staves and 5000 tons of timbers. The staves soon became barrels and the lumber was used mostly for ship construction. The West Indies were likewise major customers, buying 2.3 million feet of boards and planks along with 2.3 million shingles, 9 thousand clapboards, and 114 houseframes in the same year. Unlike the British though, they

used most of the imported wood supplies constructing buildings rather than ships. The Indies also were good stave purchasers, taking about 60 thousand, to be used for molasses and rum barrels. Coastal sales were somewhat lower; still, in 1768, Falmouth sent out 336 thousand feet of boards, 8000 clapboards, and 360 thousand shingles to Boston and elsewhere. Furthermore, there was a coastal market for trunnels, shook hogsheads, hoops, and anchor stocks. (16)

Falmouth merchants also sold their timber in the form of vessels. They would build a craft, load it with wood products, and sell it and its cargo in England, the West Indies or along the coast. They would often trade first along the Atlantic seaboard and in the Indies, and then send the vessel and a load of sugar to Britain. All the merchants were willing to trade off their boats and ships anytime if the price was right.

The trade in agricultural and miscellaneous products was not large; still, a fair number of townsmen brought in some items to the local merchants. For example, in 1749, a local inhabitant Bryce McLellan paid for goods purchased from Ephraim Jones with 25 fowls, two ducks, three geese, fish, veal, a tub of butter and some planks. No doubt most products of these types were traded locally although a few were exported. Either way, this trade provided some farmers and landowners essential credit with which to buy imported goods, and so was important for the operation of the commercial community. Livestock products formed the bulk of these goods, although a variety of items such as butter, corn, and turnips were also traded in small quantities. (17)

A few merchants in Falmouth were able to take advantage of unique opportunities to export several extra large shipments of local goods. A good example was Enoch Freeman, who arranged several supply trips to Annapolis Royal and Louisbourg for government contractors, making a substantial profit in the process. (18)

Unlike exports, there are no good statistics concerning the amount of Falmouth imports from 1740 to 1775. However, a good deal of information is available regarding what was being imported, from where, and by what routes. Most of the imports into Falmouth came from three major sources - England, the West Indies, and the Atlantic coast. The small remainder was brought from such widely scattered spots as the East Indies, the Madeira Islands, and Central America. The English trade was very important as it furnished Falmouth with a great variety of needed manufactures. For example, Britain was sending the colonial port such diverse items as scissors, paper, yarn, cloth, nails, kettles, and pots. A look at any list of personal

holdings or records of commercial activities for the period will substantiate the colonists' great dependency on English goods and manufactures.

The West Indies supplied the community with three highly pleasurable imports. Sugar and molasses helped satisfy the colonist's sweet tooth; but even more important, the Caribbeans sent up just the item the Maine resident needed through the long winters (and short summers for that matter)--rum. Rum was imported in large quantities by almost every merchant and the townspeople did their best to keep the business going. Several of the commercial leaders had constructed a distillery in town but it was by no means equal to local demands.

The coastal trade provided Falmouth with food supplies, the third major group of imports. The local market was generally good and especially so in late winter when corn and flour reserves fell dangerously low. Thus the merchants could usually expect to do a fairly substantial business in this area. For example, during one stretch from February 2 to May 16, 1747, Enoch Freeman brought in at least 24 barrels of flour and a hundred bushels of corn which he sold almost as fast as he received them.

The colonists did receive a few items for other areas. Tea was probably the most important, coming from the East Indies via England. Also such commodities as nutmeg, cinnamon, silk goods and raisins were imported. However, this type of trade was small.

Although identifying the merchandise received is not a great task, tracing its routes to Falmouth is somewhat more difficult. The major portion of goods evidently came via Boston. Enoch Freeman probably exemplified a common situation in a statement that, "I have been Supply'd from Boston by Mess.^{rs} Colman & Sparhawk, Mr. Sturgis, Mr. Stover but Chiefly by M.^r Hancock." (20) Not all imports came through Boston though. Some of the community's merchants traded directly with the West Indies; others such as Captain William Ross and Robert Pagen carried on transatlantic business with Great Britain; and not a few were doing a substantial coastal trade. (21) On the whole however, this direct trade was dwarfed by the imports coming up from Boston.

When considering the topics of importing and exporting in pre-Revolutionary Falmouth, one soon becomes aware of entrepot activities of Falmouth's merchants. These centered in two areas - collecting and shipping hinterland products, and importing and selling outside commodities.

Getting exportables to the wharves was the first job which the merchants faced. For most of their timber exports they

contracted with local inhabitants who then procured the various items. Masts were floated down the several rivers, hauled around rapids and finally tied up along the commercial water front. Timber to be sawed was sleighed or dragged out on the ice and floated to the mills in the spring. There the wood was cut into various lumber and other wood products, after which the merchants would hire day laborers and small boat owners to carry the boards and planks down to Falmouth. Still, a fair number of the country people and others selling timber and agricultural products brought in the goods themselves. For example, Cornelius Keife brought Captain John Waite thirty cords of wood to be shipped out. Also, many of the materials brought in by the nearby farmers were in small enough quantities that they could be carried to town with little difficulty. This was certainly true for Richard Stubbs who brought Enoch Freeman 9 1/2 pounds of beef, two pounds of butter and a half bushel of turnips. (22)

Although some of the collected products were sold locally, much that the merchants had gathered was shipped out in exchange for needed imports. Once these arrived, they were apparently dropped off along the coast at Falmouth and other centers or boated up to the back country on the several rivers entering Casco Bay. Then they were broken down into small quantities and sold retail. The size of the market which the Falmouth merchants were servicing in order to get enough customers was surprisingly large. Ephraim Jones was selling goods at North Yarmouth, Small Point, Gorham and Harpswell, and Freeman was sending merchandise several miles inland. (23)

One problem continually facing the merchants and their customers was a lack of money. To solve it they soon developed a system of perpetual credit and barter exchange. The inhabitants would purchase on credit and then pay off later with local products. If one's payments equalled more than his bill it was credited to his account and applied to later purchases. For instance Elizha Baker brought Jones a mast worth £25 and applied his credit to purchases made over the next nine months. (24)

One remaining question must still be answered and that is, "Just how much money did the merchant make?" By checking the difference in the cost and selling price of three commodities handled by Enoch Freeman - lumber, corn, and rum - a rough idea can be obtained. Freeman bought average lumber for £6 per thousand and higher grade boards for £8. He sold them for £8 and £11 respectively, thereby getting a 33 percent margin on the lesser quality and 38 percent on the better. Corn cost Freeman 13s.7d. and paid but 17s., a gain of only 25 percent.

Rum however made money. Enoch imported it for 14s. and sold it for 20, a margin of nearly 45 percent per gallon. If these figures are at all representative, it appears that Freeman generally sold at about 35 percent higher than he bought. This is a good return, but not excessive when one starts subtracting overhead, warehousing, transportation, wages and so on. With these taken out, Freeman probably cleared around a ten percent profit. (25)

In conclusion, the success of colonial Falmouth can be largely explained by its abundant timber resources, headed by the giant white pines, and by the many varied activities of the port's mercantile leaders. Both seemed to be necessary in enabling Falmouth to overcome its several inherent commercial shortcomings from 1740 to 1775.

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(1) Robert G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815-1860*. New York, 1939, pp. 24, 25, 34, 36; William H. Rowe, *The Maritime history of Maine*. New York, 1948, p. 17.

(2) William Willis, ed., *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith and the Rev. Samuel Deane, Pastors of the First Church in Portland: With Notes and Biographical Notices and a Summary History of Portland*. Portland, 1849, p. 2.

(3) William Willis Papers: Vol. K., Ephraim Jones' Philadelphia Book of Town Accounts, Dec., 2, 1760 - March 20, 1780, pp. 1, 3, 4, 8, *et passim* and Vol. L Ephraim Jones' Account Book, Jan. 7, 1747-Jan. 6, 1758, pp. 2, 3, 205, 226, *et passim*; Enoch Freeman: Journal A. Various Accounts, Invoices, Rents, Car-goes, 1742-1771, pp. 144-174, 194, 206, 269-280, *et passim*.

(4) Rev. John Carroll Perkins, "Some Old Papers Recently Found in the Stone Tower of the First Parish Church of Portland," Maine Historical Society, *Collections and Proceedings*, 2nd. ser., VI (1895), 16-17; William Willis, *The History of Portland*, Part II, *From 1700 to 1833*. Portland, 1833, pps. 110-111; Freeman: Journal, 194, 206, 216, 289; Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 77, 237n, 316.

(5) Joseph Williamson, "Brigadier-General Samuel Waldo, 1696-1759," Maine Historical Society, *Collections*, IX (1887), 81-85; William Goold, *Portland in the Past*. Portland, 1886, 268, 414; *Falmouth Gazette*, Feb. 12, 1785; John Langdon Sibley, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts*. Boston, 1945, VIII, 581; *Biographical Review: Leading Citizens of Cumberland County, Maine*. Boston, 1896, 15; William Willis, *The History of Portland From 1632 to 1864*. Portland, 1865, 446, 465-466, 550, 562, 809; Willis,

Smith and Deane, 164, 194, 250.

(6) Willis, *Portland*, II, 1700-1833, 104-105; Willis, *Portland*, 1632-1864, 449; Freeman, *Journal*: 193, 204, 206, *et passim*.

(7) Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 351, 145, 230n, 329, *et passim*; *Falmouth Neck as It Was When Destroyed in 1775*, a map, Portland, no date.

(8) Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 128-129, 306-307; Willis, *Portland*, 1632-1864, 457, 484, 795-796, 813-815.

(9) Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 140-141, 144, 157; Marion Jaques Smith, *A History of Maine*, Portland, 1949, 281-282; *Falmouth Gazette*, January 18, 1785.

(10) Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 117, 128-129, 159, 363-364, 372-373; *Biographical Review*, 13-14; Goold, *Portland*, 247, 335, 368, 391, 414; Willis, *Portland*, II, 1700-1833, 73-74, 174, 180; Willis, *Portland*, 1632-1864, 465-466, 805-807, 813-815, 835-839, 850-853; William Freeman, "Samuel Freeman, His Life and Services," *Maine Historical Society, Collections and Proceedings*, 2nd ser., V, 1894, 1-32.

(11) Joseph Malone, *Pine Trees and Politics*. Seattle, 1964, 180.

(12) Robert G. Albion, *Forests and Sea Power*. Hamden, Conn., 1926, 270, 276, 283; Malone, *Pine Trees and Politics*. 104, 180; Leonard Chapman, "The Mast Industry of Old Falmouth," *Maine Historical Society, Collections and Proceedings*, 2nd ser., VII, 1896, 390-404; Williamson, "Samuel Waldo," 85.

(13) Albion, *Forests and Sea Power*, ch. 7.

(14) William H. Rowe, *Shipbuilding Days in Casco Bay, 1727-1890*. Portland, 1929, 18-19.

(15) Malone, *Pine Trees and Politics*, 172; Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 177; Doctor Ralph Davis (University of Leicester, Leicester, England) to Edwin A. Churchill (Bangor, Maine), February 26, 1969.

(16) Malone, *Pine Trees and Politics*, 154-155.

(17) Freeman: *Journal*, 163, 174, 219, *et passim*; Willis Papers: Vol. L., 3

(18) Freeman: *Journal*, 193-194, 205, 216, 237, 243.

(19) *Ibid.*, inside cover, 250, 301, *et passim*; Willis Papers: Vol. L., 2.

(20) Enoch Freeman (Falmouth) to Christopher Kilby (London, England), June 1, 1752, in Freeman: *Journal*, 3 pages before back cover.

(21) Freeman: *Journal*, 150, 157, 215, *et passim*; Willis, *Smith and Deane*, 204, 220; Willis Papers: Vol. L., 2; Willis, *Portland*, 1632-1864, 455.

(22) Freeman: *Journal*, 163, 174, 221, 428, *et passim*.

(23) Willis Papers: Vol. L. 7, 8, also letter from John Thompson (probably Scarboro, Maine) to Ephraim Jones (Falmouth), July 24, 1775.

(24) *Ibid.*, 8.

(25) Freeman: Journal, 250, 252, 254.

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