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Population Change, Economic Development, and the Revolution: Newport, Rhode Island, as a Case Study, 1760-1800

By

Lynne Elizabeth Withey

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Approved:

William S. Simmons .....

Winthrop D. Jordan .....

Robert Middlekauff .....

Committee in Charge

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For Michael

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RIHS: Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence

RISA: Rhode Island State Archives, Providence

NHS: Newport Historical Society, Newport

JCB: John Carter Brown Library, Brown University

MHS: Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston

BL: Baker Library, Harvard University School of Business

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial America was a land populated by rural folk. The New England town, the Virginia plantation, the backcountry farmer, are the characters who appear again and again in the writing of early American history. It is easy to forget that even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cities were an important part of American settlement and growth. Early cities were much smaller in size than their modern counterparts, and a smaller proportion of Americans lived in them. But these cities were more influential than their size would suggest. They served as centers of trade and communications; city leaders were largely responsible for maintaining contacts among the different colonies and between America and the mother country.

Colonial cities were not only larger than the small towns in which most early Americans lived, but also had more varied populations and served a wider range of economic functions. Urban populations included more variety in occupations and greater extremes of wealth than small towns or rural areas. Highly specialized artisans -- makers of fine furniture or carriages, for example -- required a larger population base to support their services (and often required a wealthier population as well). Other craftsmen, such as shipbuilders, practiced trades which were demanded exclusively, or in larger numbers, in cities. The economic opportunities to be found in cities encouraged the existence of great extremes in wealth, since fortunes could be made from profitable commercial ventures, while the promise of work attracted poor

people as well. Cities were also likely to have very mobile populations, with higher rates of migration and sometimes unstable family groups.

Yet despite characteristics which set them apart from small towns, colonial cities had a provincial atmosphere compared with more modern cities. With populations of only a few thousand, small buildings, poor streets, and governments which were only town meetings on a larger scale, the cities of two hundred years ago gave the appearance of being little more than sprawling towns. Poor transportation and communication, and infrequent contacts among the colonies limited them to serving small areas. High-density concentration of population was unnecessary and virtually unknown. As a result, in the eighteenth century there were many communities which served typically urban functions, but none of them were very large by modern standards. The conglomeration of population into a few huge urban centers was still far in the future. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, this pattern began to change.

Newport, as the fifth largest city in this period, with a population of slightly over 9,000 people at the time of the Revolution, provides a useful case study of the development of an eighteenth century city. Like all other colonial cities, Newport owed its existence to trade. Located on an island at the entrance to the Narragansett Bay, with an excellent harbor which was open year round, it was well situated for commerce. Newport residents began to develop commercial activities from the earliest days of settlement in the seventeenth century, but the city reached its peak in both size and prosperity in the fifteen years before the Revolution. It was hard hit, both physically and economically, by the war and declined rapidly thereafter. Though it remained a seafaring town well into the nineteenth century, Newport's

importance as an urban center largely ended with the Revolution. Thus this city compressed into a relatively short time the process of urban growth and decline.

Urban development in Newport, as in other cities, was partly a gradual, impersonal process, involving such conditions as geographical location, currency problems, legal restrictions on trade, technological changes, and competition from other cities. But the process of development was not always gradual nor always totally impersonal. The nature of leadership is important in the growth of any city, particularly in discussing questions of urban rivalry. And major political or social events -- in this case, the Revolution -- exert an influence of their own. Understanding the process of urbanization requires an understanding of the way in which individual decisions and sudden, drastic changes react with more gradual changes in population and economic activity.

This examination of Newport's development in the late eighteenth century, therefore, focuses on three major issues: the nature of the city's population; its economic growth and decline; and the impact of the Revolution on the city. The discussion of population traces the growth of Newport from a village outpost to an important city, examining the composition of the population to determine those characteristics which made it particularly urban. The age and sex structure of the population, the size of families, and the degree of geographical mobility in Newport all marked it as different from the "average" eighteenth century town.

Tracing the economic development of the city involves several problems. Since Newport, like other cities of the period, depended on trade for its livlihood, an analysis of shipping -- including volume of

shipping, the routes which were most commonly followed, and the nature of investment in shipping enterprises -- is necessary to understand Newport's economic health. The activities of the city's merchants are discussed at some length, since these men were largely responsible for the development of trade. The effect of economic growth and decline on individuals is considered in an analysis of patterns of economic mobility.

In every area of Newport's development between 1760 and 1800 -- whether it involves population, families, mobility, or trade -- the effect of the Revolution is obvious. This study concludes, therefore, with a more specific consideration of the war itself, its effect on Newport, and the relative importance of the abrupt changes caused by the war and the more gradual changes stemming from other sources in determining the decline of Newport as a city.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN URBAN POPULATION

The early history of Newport has become almost legendary -- a handful of Massachusetts colonists led by the indomitable Anne Hutchinson, banished from Massachusetts for their heretical religious beliefs, headed south to the area where Roger Williams had launched a new settlement two years earlier. After establishing a village at the northern end of Aquidneck Island in the Narragansett Bay, which they named Portsmouth, part of the band under the direction of William Coddington moved farther south to settle the town of Newport. In 1640 the town was formally organized and officials elected.[1]

Newport's growth from a tiny village to a major port city was not accidental. These exiles sought not only a place where they could practice their religion unfettered, but also an advantageous economic location. Although best known for their religious beliefs and for their determination to observe religious toleration, the founders were also prosperous and resourceful as well. Within just a few years after their initial settlement, the proprietors of the island towns had established a flourishing agricultural economy, which soon spread to neighboring Conanicut Island (Jamestown) and to the coastal areas of the mainland. The quick success of the Rhode Island settlers was not mere fortune; they planned their resettlement carefully, seeking good land and a location which would lend itself to commercial activity. The religious toleration of Williams' Providence must have been attractive to the Hutchinsons and their friends, but it was not the only consideration

in their decision to make new homes in the Narragansett region.[2] The land of the Narragansett Bay islands was fertile, and protected from the ravages of wild animals, an important consideration for livestock farming. At the southern tip of the island, where Newport was located, there was a good natural harbor, situated so that ships could anchor safely even in a strong wind. The generally mild climate (by New England standards), so often the subject of comment by later visitors, was advantageous for agriculture and nearly always kept the harbor free of ice.[3] The religious beliefs of these settlers, their financial means and their careful planning resulted in the establishment of a settlement which was soon characterized by its religious cosmopolitanism and commercial activity. Agriculture was the first concern of the proprietors, but from the outset they thought in terms of commercial, rather than subsistence, agriculture, and developing trade was an early goal. As early as 1642, they succeeded in establishing trade relations with New Amsterdam in order to obtain necessary supplies (and to reduce their dependance on the hostile Bostonians); but the 1650's they were producing surplus agricultural goods and carrying on a limited trade with Boston and Salem as well as with New Amsterdam.[4]

By the 1650's the southern Rhode Island settlement expanded to include Conanicut Island and coastal areas on the mainland.[5] These areas had natural advantages similar to those of Aquidneck Island; the mainland area was dotted with small bays and inlets which permitted coastal farmers to maintain their own boats for easy transport of goods to and from Newport.[6] By the early years of the eighteenth century, the mainland proved even more profitable for commercial agriculture than the island. The land area was much more extensive,

and wealthy men on the scene in the early days of settlement were able to obtain huge tracts where they raised livestock and some other commercial products and enjoyed the life of gentlemen farmers. In general, the economy and social life of this region in the eighteenth century was markedly different from the subsistence agriculture characteristic of most of New England. These wealthy farmers, who were dubbed the "Narragansett Planters," preferred to compare themselves with England or southern country gentlemen.[7]

As this agricultural economy became increasingly sophisticated in the eighteenth century, Newport itself developed a more specialized function as a commercial center. Although it did not become an important city until the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the groundwork for this position was laid in the seventeenth century. The first settlers themselves had initiated limited commercial activities, and the religious diversity that they encouraged brought men from other areas who could use their prior contacts to promote commercial relationships.

From a mere three hundred souls in 1650, Newport had grown rapidly to become a city of over 9,000 on the eve of the Revolution.[8] Changes in population are the most basic indication of the pattern of Newport's growth and decline. Its peak population of 9,208 in 1774 represented an increase of 36.4 per cent over its population of 6,753 recorded in the previous census in 1755. In the pre-Revolutionary years it was more than twice the size of its neighbor and future commercial rival, Providence. (Table 1) But when the first post-Revolutionary census was taken, in 1782, Newport's population had dropped to 4,758, only slightly more than half the 1774 figure.

Table 1: Comparative Population Figures

Year	City					
	Newport	Providence	Boston	New York	Philadelphia	Charleston
1700			6,700	5,000	5,000	2,000
1708	2,203	1,446				
1710			9,000	5,700	6,500	3,000
1720			12,000	7,000*	10,000	3,500
1730	4,640	3,916	13,000*	8,622*	11,500	4,500
1742			16,382*	11,000	13,000	6,800
1755	6,753	3,159				
1760			15,631	18,000	23,750	8,000
1774	9,208	4,321				
1775			16,000	25,000	40,000	12,000
1782	4,758					
1790	6,725	6,380	18,038	33,131	54,336	16,359
1800	6,999	7,614	24,937	60,489	41,220	20,392
1810	7,907	10,071	33,250	96,373	53,722	24,711
1820	7,319	11,767	43,298	123,706	63,802	24,780

*These figures, and all Rhode Island figures, are from censuses; all other pre-1790 figures are estimates.

Sources: Rhode Island: Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, 1774 (Providence, 1858); Census of 1755, broadside in RIHS; Census of 1708, in John Bartlett, ed., Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England (Providence, 1859), IV, 59; Census of 1730, in John Callender, A Historical Discourse of the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island, Vol. IV of Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society (Providence, 1838), 94; Census of 1782, reprinted in New England Historical and Genealogical Register, Jan. 1972, 5-17 and April 1973, 138-42. Other cities: Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness: Urban Life in America, 1625-1742 (New York, 1938), 143, 303; Cities in Revolt, Urban Life in America 1743-1776 (New York, 1955), 216; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Heads of Families,at the First Census of the United States, taken in the Year 1790 (Washington, 1908); and Censuses of 1800, 1810, and 1820 (Washington, 1801, 1811, 1821).

The immediate cause of this population decline was the British occupation of Newport during the Revolution, which forced a large proportion of the inhabitants to flee to more secure parts of the country. This flight from the city was encouraged by colony officials. A resolution passed by the General Assembly in January, 1776, cited the "defenceless state of the town of Newport" and encouraged residents "forthwith to remove to some place of safety all their aged people, women, children and those who are unable to assist in the defence of the place, together with their valuable effects." Two hundred pounds were voted from the general treasury to assist poor people to leave.[9] Some people left the city during the war with the intention of settling elswhere permanently, in places where they had land or business interests. For example, James Clarke, who had an estate in Dominica, in the West Indies, heard about Newport's problems on his way home from a voyage. He did not even return to port, but headed for the island and sent for his family later. And Gilbert Stuart (father of the painter) owned land in Nova Scotia, where he moved when it became apparent that Newport was no longer a safe place to be.[10] Others probably intended to return to Newport after the war, but found it easier just to remain in their new residences. In any case, the city never really recovered from this drop in population. It took until 1790 to return to the population level of 1755; during the early nineteenth century, the population wavered around the 8,000 mark but never reached the pre-Revolution level. Other major cities recovered from the Revolution much more quickly. And Providence, little more than a country town in the 1750's and 1760's, had overtaken Newport in size by 1800 and continued to grow rapidly thereafter.

The last two censuses taken by Rhode Island before it joined the

federal union, for the years 1774 and 1782, were unusually detailed by eighteenth century standards. Together with the early federal censuses, they provide the basis for more detailed analysis of Newport's population.[11] All of these censuses listed heads of household by name, with an enumeration of the members of the household broken down according to sex and broad age groups (except in 1790, when no age breakdown was given for women). Blacks, and sometimes Indians, were listed separately. From these lists it is possible to get a rough idea of the age, sex, and racial characteristics of the city. By comparing the names listed on each census, it is also possible to get a general idea of the length of residence of members of the population. These sources reveal a city with an unusually large number of blacks, by northern standards, especially before the Revolution; an unbalanced sex ratio, with far more women than men; and a surprisingly low number of children.

Women outnumbered men considerably, particularly within the adult population. The sex ratio (males per 100 females) was only 86.5 in 1774, compared with 100.2 for the colony as a whole and 96.8 for Massachusetts nine years earlier. (Table 2) The ratio was still lower -- 80.1 -- when the adult population only is considered. This lopsided sex ratio was compounded by the drain of men away from the city during the Revolution. By 1782, the sex ratio among adults had dipped to 59.1; for the population as a whole it was 74.5. Even in 1800, the ratio was still lower than the pre-Revolutionary level: 82.7 in the whole population, 70.4 in the adult population. The ratio for all of Rhode Island, by contrast, was 94.9; for Massachusetts,

Table 2: Sex and Age Ratios

	Males per 100 Females*						
	1765	1774	1782	1790	1800	1810	1820
Newport		86.5	74.5	79.5	82.7	89.7	87.3
Rhode Island		100.2	92.5	97.4	94.9	95.4	94.1
Massachusetts	96.8			95.9	97.1	97.5	95.4
United States				103.7	104.0	104.0	103.3

	Males over 16 per 100 Females over 16						
	1765	1774	1782	1790**	1800	1810	1820
Newport		80.1	59.1		70.4	83.8	80.1
Rhode Island		91.2	83.3		87.0	90.4	87.1
Massachusetts	90.8				91.1	92.9	91.0
United States						102.8	102.8

	Children under 16 per 100 Females over 16						
	1765	1774	1782	1790**	1800	1810	1820
Newport		121.5	126.3		113.4	134.0	108.9
Rhode Island		163.4	165.8		156.8	149.7	140.6
Massachusetts	173.4				156.9	150.5	138.7
United States						203.0	194.0

*All tables include white population only.

**The 1790 census did not break down female population by age.

Sources: Same as Table 1. Figures for Massachusetts in 1765 from Daniel Scott Smith, "Population, Family and Society in Hingham, Massachusetts, 1635-1880," (unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1973), 60-61.

92.5; for the United States as a whole, 104. The demographic effects of the Revolution went beyond simply draining population away from the city, for the outward migration involved far more men than women, leaving Newport with a large surplus female population. (More complete figures on the age distribution of the population appear in Appendix 1-A.)

The child-woman ratio (number of children under 16 per 100 women over 16) in Newport was also low in comparison with other parts of the country. The ratio was 121.5 in 1774, much lower than the colony ratio of 163.4 and the Massachusetts figure of 173.4 for 1765. Furthermore, after a slight increase to 126.3 in 1782, Newport's ratio declined to 113.4 by 1800. Nevertheless, the proportion of children in the population was still high by modern standards -- around 40 per cent up to 1820, when it began to drop. For the country as a whole (after 1790) the figure was closer to 50 per cent.[12]

Newport's population was unusual also in its high proportion of blacks. These individuals cannot be described as completely as the white members of the population, because censuses usually categorized them only in terms of race or legal status (slave or free). Only the 1774 and 1782 censuses gave age and sex breakdowns for blacks and Indians. Newport's nonwhite population was very large by northern standards, but, like the white population, declined sharply after the Revolution. (Table 3) Blacks and Indians, however, were even less likely than whites to return after the war, and they made up a smaller proportion of the population by the end of the century than before the Revolution.

The nonwhite population in Newport reached its peak size of 1,292

Table 3: Nonwhite Population in Newport

	1708	1730	1755	1774	1782	1790	1800	1810	1820
Blacks	220	649	1234	1246	500				
Indians	--*	148	--*	46	15				
Free nonwhite						421	572	630	549
Slaves						226	103	0	17
Total nonwhite	220	797	1234	1292	515	646	675	630	566
Total pop.	2203	4640	5519	9208	4758	6725	6799	7907	7319
Per cent nonwhite	10.0	17.2	22.3	14.0	10.8	9.6	9.9	8.0	7.7

*Not available

Sources: Sames as Table 1.