At Water’s Edge: Empire, Disorder, and Commerce on the Docks in British America, 1714-1774.

Toby Nash

Master of Arts

University of Melbourne,
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies

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Introduction

General Thomas Gage, the newly-appointed military governor of Massachusetts stepped off gangplank from the HMS *Lively* onto Boston’s Long Wharf on 17 May 1774. Boston greeted him with an elaborate parade of imperial officials and military units, saluting in formation.\(^1\) Two months earlier, British Parliament had passed a law, known to history as the ‘Boston Port Act’, which began by stating its purpose: “to discontinue … the landing and discharging, lading or shipping, of goods, wares, and merchandise, at the town, and within the harbour, of Boston.”\(^2\) Boston’s docks were legally closed for business and General Gage had arrived on site, tasked with stringently enforcing this law.

From the beginning of June, nothing moved in Boston Harbour. The Port Act, like any blockade of a port, aimed to cut off commercial exchange through maritime channels. The text of the Act was ambitious and absolute in its wording, stating: “any such goods, wares, or merchandise, shall … be laden or taken in from the shore into any barge, hoy, lighter, wherry, or boat, to be carried on board any ship or vessel … shall be lost and forfeited.” To accomplish its mission, the focus of the Port Act had to be on the wharves of Boston. The words “wharf”, “port”, “quay”, and “harbour” are used thirty-two times in the course of the document.\(^3\) The second section of the Act, outlining the punishment particularly illustrates this focus:

> That if any wharfinger, or keeper of any wharf, crane, or quay, or their servants … shall take up or land, or knowingly suffer to be taken up or landed, or shall ship off, or suffer to be waterborne, at or from any of their said wharfs, cranes, or quays, any such goods wares, or merchandise … every person whatever who shall be assisting, or otherwise concerned in the shipping or in the loading or putting on board any boat

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\(^3\) “The Boston Port Act: March 31, 1774.”
… shall forfeit and lose treble the value thereof, to be computed at the highest price which such sort of goods, wares, and merchandise.\textsuperscript{4}

This saga is often treated within larger frameworks as the last straw in the path to military conflict between British American colonists and the imperial government across the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{5} But as we shall see, it had a more immediate and localised meaning.

Overhearing a conversation in a tavern in Shrewsbury in central Massachusetts, John Adams recalls one farmer declaring to another that “If parliament can take away Mr. Hancock’s wharf and Mr. Rowe’s wharf, they can take away your barn and my house.”\textsuperscript{6} Even far inland, the wharves symbolised something supremely significant, something larger, at a personal or communal level. But at an imperial level, the Act nominally targeted at the port of Boston, in an attempt to restore order and governance over this same space. While broadly operating to halt commerce and shipping generally, the critical spatial range for the Boston Port Act’s enforcement is unquestionably the waterfront. The Empire instituted a complete prohibition of waterfront mobility and trade, what Russell Bourne calls “a total disruption of the waterfront.”\textsuperscript{7} With these extreme measures, clearly the British government had concluded that this zone required a forceful restoration of imperial governance. In the years previous, Bostonians felt that their wharves, the heart of their city, had been imposed upon. Offended, many sought to defend and protect this space. Similarly, the British imperial administration, seeing dockside

\textsuperscript{4} “The Boston Port Act: March 31, 1774.”
operations disrupted, sought to regain order and control. But what was it about the waterfront that led it to seem so crucial to all parties?

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Colonial port-cites acted as essential nodes of trade, shipping, administration, and security. The key component part of these cities in performing this maritime transit was the waterfront sector, where the ocean’s tides lapped against the city’s docks. The docks functioned as a central point of entry and exit, powering commerce and transportation, a nexus for the exchange of goods and people from ship to shore. Through a spatial lens, this thesis looks at this exchange in the context of early modern Empire—specifically eighteenth-century British America.

In the Age of Sail—loosely defined between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries—the mercantilist extraction of wealth through the colonial docks was a key goal for empires and this necessitated orderly administration and governance of this waterfront transition by the state. But insecure imperial control over flows of commodities and people here as well as the docklands environment, created difficulties for the British state. By examining this area in terms of space and place, what we find, is a funnel or ‘bottleneck’ with numerous vested economic interests and significant environmental instability, which could hinder the ordered imperial process. My contention is that delving into this small quarter of the city enlightens us as to how disruptions at the colonial waterfront could cause disruption to the Empire as a whole. By exploring the docks, I argue, we gain a more complex understanding of

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the British state apparatus and its administrative and commercial difficulties and vulnerabilities.

I have selected six high-traffic port-cities with prime economic importance for my analysis: New York, Boston, Newport, Charleston, Philadelphia and Kingston. Amongst these, the case of Kingston may seem an outlier, due to its Caribbean location, as may Newport, due to its smaller population and size. Although often separated from, or left out of, older histories of colonial America towns, Kingston played a vital role in urban British America, as a point of entry for hundreds of thousands of African slaves and as a point of exit for Jamaica’s most valuable export commodity—sugar. The Kingston waterfront, thus, ranked extremely high in terms of imperial concern.⁹ Newport was also a central point of transhipping in the Americas, often a first port-of-call on transatlantic voyages. Further, its growing economic importance stemmed from its labour supply, Newport notoriously had a high concentration of seafarers among its populace, and the movements of labour and ships through Newport was of much value to the Empire.¹⁰ Altogether these port-cities are suitability placed for this analysis as they are diverse and important urban commercial nodes, but more than that, as cities in a colonial setting, they also possess a sense of tenuousness, vulnerability, and reliance on imperial shipping flows, which, I argue, generated problematic governance issues specifically at the waterfront.

Urban historians have long noted the importance of port towns, acknowledging the wharves as a key factor in the social, economic, political and military life of cities. There has

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been a movement towards examining “port towns”, conceiving these towns as transitional areas between land and sea. I seek to narrow this focus further, from the ‘port’, to the ‘waterfront’, and in such to improve our understandings of Empire. This approach fills the gap in scholarship regarding the importance of functional exchange at the water’s edge in both local and imperial conceptions. Urban historians from a new wave of port-city and sailor-town history emerging in the UK and in Europe have been lately drawn to the waterfront as a significant space. Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James, in their introduction to *Port Towns and Urban Cultures*, as well as Carola Hein in her recent work on port-cities, have noted the “liminal nature” of the waterfront as a “border between land and sea.” This is a critical observation as my work intends to isolate and appraise this border as an indispensable commercial nucleus. By narrowing focus onto this liminal space in order to better perceive the fluidity of movements, exchanges, and interchanges affecting larger structures—in this case the littoral world of a seaborne empire.

Since the 1980s, maritime historians have pushed towards a “littoral” structure for their field, shifting traditional seaborne histories to encompass: life and culture in the port, shipbuilding industries, and movements of migrations and trade throughout goods through port. Australian maritime historians Frank Broeze and Michael N. Pearson have both called for maritime history to move its focus onto this more “littoral” or “amphibious” type of analysis, incorporating and tracing movements between land and sea. Historians of the Mediterranean Gelina Harlaftis and Maria Fusaro have also pushed for this type of littoral maritime history, moving through and encompassing the docks, port-cities and urban coastal spaces more

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11 Beaven, Bell, and James, “Introduction,” 1.
generally. These calls to expand and integrate make sense given that the land-sea border is characterised by movement and interaction. This discourse acknowledges that maritime history is too often seen as the study only of ships and on-water navigation, with a greater focus needed on the processes occurring at the waterfront—docking, processing, inspecting, loading, offloading, and crewing ships.

The waterfront lies at a liminal intersection between the city and the sea. While urban and maritime historians have both gravitated towards waterfront space at the fringe of their respective fields, not enough has been done to concentrate precisely on this area and its function. Geographically, the waterfront represented movement, transaction, value, and competition to larger structures, particularly in oceanic shipping empires. Exploring the dynamic economic and human movements between water and land, I intend to critically approach and relocate both fields to uncover the colonial docks as an important and understudied junction of historical transaction in which urban and maritime histories and geographies interact, converge and coalesce.

The work of geographers provides a theoretical structure with which to assess particular interactions with this ‘space’ and, by infusing human stories, cultures, and politics, produce a distinct historical ‘place’. Two geographical schools, which isolate and analyse the waterfront as a discrete urban sector, emerge prominently in the secondary literature. The first group—mainly historical and economic geographers—have looked at the function of the waterfront; the second group—led by the work of Brian Hoyle—have primarily covered the development of the waterfront.


Looking first at this ‘historical geography’ group, Martyn Bowden’s spatial model of the “mercantile triangle” is a deeply insightful typology which locates and categorises the
waterfront as a prominent and significant district within the port-town. Bowden importantly explicates the four key roles of the waterfront sector: shipping, wholesaling, warehousing and commission. Relevant specifically to period and locale of my analysis, Stephen Hornsby has adapted the Bowden model of “mercantile triangle” and applies it to the colonial American context (Figure 1). This model identifies not only the early modern waterfront’s trading character, but its economic function as a space for wholesaling goods, warehousing and freighting; storing and governing; in the transferral from the waterfront point-of-entry into the town proper.15 Douglas McManis makes use of a similar model, relating to villages in colonial New England (Figure 2). His “model of functional zonation in urban villages” seeks to understand the waterfront as a zone of “primary commerce”, a more generalised term for the same process of movement and conveyance which Hornsby and Bowden have mapped.16 These models cast the space of the colonial waterfront as a place of commerce. I plan to expand on these works by analysing how historical actors and institutions interacted with and attempted to govern the colonial waterfront.

Brian Hoyle’s 1989 geographic model of the “Port-City Interface” emphasises the changing place of the waterfront through time as well as in space. While focussing primarily, on the geographic development of port facilities in the post-industrial age, Hoyle has some important insights into the waterfront’s evolving role in relation to waterfront life which I utilise. While focused primarily on dynamics of construction and development, Hoyle briefly categorises waterfront space in the pre-industrial age. He argues that, in this era, the city and port were inextricably linked; this meant that administrative facilities (counting houses, merchant residences, customs apparatus) and the key commercial infrastructure (warehouses, cranes, wharves) had to be in close proximity. In other works, Hoyle articulates the distinctive character of the port-city and the waterfront’s place within the city. Hoyle and the proponents of his model mostly work on the post-industrial age, as is true of much of the historiography of the waterfront specifically.

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Building on Hoyle, a variety of scholars have taken on the task of charting waterfront construction and reconstruction. For example, the edited volume *Port Cities as Areas of Transition: Ethnographic Perspectives*, features new research on ports and their relation to the urban waterfront, but the focus of its authors is again post-industrial development of these spaces. In the Asian context, waterfront space in East Asia after the Opium Wars has gained significant attention from historians and geographers, but is particularly consumed by histories of development. Jeremy E. Taylor and Chen Yu have separately looked at the Treaty Ports of China, including Hong Kong, Macau and Shanghai, focusing heavily on how these places were viewed, transformed and renovated socially and politically. Some hint of combining the function of the waterfront can be found briefly, in the scholarship of Canadian historical geographers, Jason Gilliland and Thomas McIlwraith, working on nineteenth-century Montreal and nineteenth-century Toronto respectively. Gilliland notes concern for time efficiency at the waterfront, seeing it as a space that could both expedite or obstruct critical movements of commerce. The focus of this school of geographers is on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but these geographers make a useful argument for recognising the importance of the urban waterfront to the function of the port-city and to wider economic structures.

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19 Waltraud Kokot et al., *Port Cities as Areas of Transition: Ethnographic Perspectives* (London: Transcript Verlag, 2009).


What comes across most strikingly in scholarship on the waterfront is a lack of retroactive projection of applicable models prior to the mid-nineteenth-century. In the early modern era, the protectionist doctrine of mercantilism, compounded rather than diminished the economic importance of this space. Particularly in the colonial context, the waterfront was the market as well as performing administrative, processing, and transportation role. In the Age of Steam, ports became enclosed, and the market exchange moved inland into the central business district, often located away from the waterfront. As David Cesarini points out, by the nineteenth-century, port facilities became “less a market and more a single point along a distribution chain.” In contrast, the eighteenth-century waterfront was lived-in socio-economic nucleus, not an enclosed industrial sector. As both a peopled wholesale marketplace and an administrative checkpoint, the context of the Age of Sail amplified the waterfront’s variegated economic interests and, in turn, instigating a disputed and negotiated process of spatial governance.

The significance of the docks in this age in particular stems from the predominance of mercantilism at this time. The maintenance of mercantilism in the colonial context was a zero-sum game and required the policing and control of private financial movements by imperial governments, with the docks serving as the crucial start and end points of these movements. The primary legal framework in which the Empire attempted to regulate and govern commercial activity were the Navigation Acts. In these Acts, the waterfront is not mentioned as a space in itself, but the content of the regulations render the waterfront a kind of implicit object or target of governance. Recent scholarly debate in imperial political economy, led by

Steve Pincus, has contested the notion of a mercantilist consensus in this era, but we can at least agree that this ethic was the prevailing, if politically disputed, stimulus for British imperialism.\textsuperscript{26} Accepting this nuance in mercantilism, we can perceive variances in the application of this preferential economic system: geographically—between the Caribbean and North America—and chronically—in times of war and economic austerity, particularly after the fiscal crisis brought about by the Seven Years’ War.

In relating this mercantilist imperial structure to its system of port-cities, a prominent work is Jacob Price’s 1974 article “The Economic Function and Growth of Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century.” Before going further, we should first note the oversights and limitations of Price’s influential work. Price neglects, as Trevor Burnard has asserted, exceptionally important British American ports, such as Charleston and Kingston, which have for this reason been included in this analysis.\textsuperscript{27} Price breaks down the functional role of the pre-industrial port-town into four: “(1) civil and ecclesiastical administration, (2) maritime transport and external commercial exchange, (3) industrial production, (4) and internal services.”\textsuperscript{28} My analysis narrows Price’s formula in two ways, focusing on his first two functions, looking at its necessary utilities of administration of the port and mobility of transportation and commerce. His third and fourth points about industrial production and internal services refers to the far larger scope of the city. Industrial or artisanal production was often placed more internally, and as McManis’ model shows, the typical location of retailing, or “local service”, is just above the waterfront (Figure 2). But specifically looking at the waterside, I would add one further element, that this space was a space of \textit{investment}. All these elements combine to accentuate


the consequence of this sector. By narrowing Price’s focus on the port-town as a whole to a
focus on waterfront space, this scaled-down approach can enlighten us to the movements and
obstructions present in daily port-city interchanges. I posit that magnifying the waterfront’s
small-scale functions—shipping, wholesale trade, governmental and business administration—and relating these functions to larger structures of early modern maritime empires assists us in understanding the practice of imperial governance in this period.

The facilitation of transportation is perhaps the most straightforward function of the
docks. In this terminal for entry and exit for people, commodities and information into the city, harbourside shipping traffic represented growth, opportunity, and connection with the wider imperial world. As Ian K. Steele and Kenneth Banks have each ably underscored, imperial administrators understood the link between of ordered transatlantic communication and effective imperial governance—the fundamental element of this being the logistics of ship transport.29 As such, the shoreline signified personal mobility, trading mobility, and connection to imperial networks.

Thus, related to this notion of transportation is waterfront commercial practice, or as
McManis and Hornsby respectively, in more precise terminology, put it: “primary commerce” and “wholesale markets.”30 Processes of docking, loading, unloading, and storing wholesale goods were perceived to be the locus of a port-city’s influence and power. The wharves embodied the market exchange, the lynchpin of supply and demand, the material incarnation of trading prosperity. Theft, loss, subversion, or misuse of goods at its point of wholesale distribution would mean there could be no retail or town commerce. But while we understand this intuitively and theoretically, delving into contemporary sources enlightens us to the real, practical focus of attention on this transitional space by ordinary citizens, dockworkers,

30 Hornsby, British Atlantic, American Frontier, 186–87; McManis, Colonial New England, 76.
merchants, and governmental officials alike. Here, ideas of risk, security, and prosperity, and, by extension, significant public concern and anxiety coalesce at the docks.

Thus, administrative oversight—accounting, recording, and inspecting—at the waterfront, played an essential role from the point-of-view of both government bureaucracy and private business. My investigation will connect the administrative space of the docks to wider concepts of the Empire, particularly drawing on John Brewer’s notion of Britain’s growing administrative “fiscal-military state” backing its military power in the eighteenth century. John Brewer points out the evolution of the state apparatus and administration in England in what he terms the “fiscal-military state.” Brewer’s work is valuable in relating the “administrative region” of the port facilities to the larger administrative framework of the Empire.31 Using this macro perspective on imperial governance, we can overlay our micro perspective on dockside functionality, drawing on the observation of David Sacks and Michael Lynch, who briefly note the early modern British port as an administrative space. They state that: “In the jargon of the customs, the word ‘port’ designated an administrative region subject to the supervision of a particular group of officials.”32 Viewing this administrative role at both the micro and macro levels, we can see the interplay between public and private in addition to imperial and local priorities in this arena.

Delving deeper into the economics of this space, we can see this conflict emerge in terms of various and competing financial investments in infrastructure. The British Empire placed significant investment in the waterfront as a safe and capacious zone for transit of trading goods necessary to revenue and taxation, mainly through harbourside fortifications. But the built environment of the waterfront, the actual infrastructure, required and attracted local,

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rather than imperial, capital investment.\textsuperscript{33} Kenneth Morgan has underscored this in the English context, looking at the ports of Liverpool and Bristol, exploring how overcrowding and expanding shipping and trade “influenced the growth of the built environment” and necessitated the formation of corporations for “harbor and dock improvements.”\textsuperscript{34} Carola Hein has emphasised this communal investment ethic, charting the history of port-cities attempts to accommodate shipping requirements through waterfront infrastructure, stretching back into the early modern age.\textsuperscript{35} Renowned urban historian Carl Bridenbaugh has reflected on how wharves, slips, and quays had to be built not only to accommodate shipping and trade, but “to attract ocean commerce,” as “the basis for their future prosperity.”\textsuperscript{36} Locals built and funded a city’s wharves, often through communal or joint-stock fixed capital investment. Due to the communal nature of this infrastructure, port-city communities were consistently moved to protect and control their wharves, generating a legal and extra-legal tensions over the waterfront’s usage.

With investment came material risk, fostering a sense of uncertainty and, in turn, anxiety. Particularly for colonial merchants, who made their investments in ship’s cargo, but also for those who made a living in maritime labour, calculating the high-risk environment of long-distance trade, the uncompleted voyage of a vessel could signal ruin.\textsuperscript{37} Accordingly, this was a heavily scrutinised and observed place of anticipation and of emotional attachment. A site of meaning and value to a population dependent on the persistence of imperial connections

and commerce for their livelihoods. At the waterside, a “forest” of ships’ masts symbolised abundance and optimism, empty wharves meant scarcity and financial stagnation.\(^{38}\)

The approach taken, is a snapshot approach, isolating critical events that take place in the waterfront sector. This means that what we have are narratives, from different cities at different times. This may seem dissonant to the reader, moving rather quickly temporally and spatially, but this is necessary to cover the ground. I have chosen this timeframe to begin with the final signing of the Peace of Utrecht—which ended the War of Spanish Succession and became a crucial moment in the balance of power between European empires and particularly in the rise of the British Empire. This periodisation also represented a time of remarkable ascendancy for the British America in terms of growth in shipping, commerce, military build-up, and urban development.\(^{39}\) The Boston Port Act in 1774 bookends this timespan, as colonial hostility progressed into rebellion, transforming the character of Britain’s relationship with its colonies.

This analysis, honing in on the early American framework, hopes to unveil how waterfront functionality takes on new meanings in fragile colonial contexts. While the early American waterfront has drawn some specifically historical scholarship, this has largely dealt with the people of the waterfront. This is particularly the case in histories of the causes of the American Revolution. Paul Gilje has stated: “The people on the waterfront played a central role in the revolutionary conflict, first as the shock troops in the mobs of the resistance movement from 1765 to 1775.”\(^{40}\) Russell Bourne makes similar observations about Boston in this timeframe, in his book *Cradle of Violence: How Boston Waterfront Mobs Ignited the*

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40 Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, xii
Revolution, again focussing on the people of Boston’s waterfront, and on mob actions, rather than the wharves themselves as an object of discussion. Also with specific reference to Boston, Benjamin L. Carp entitles the first chapter of his book Rebels Rising: “Boston’s Waterfront as Contested Space, 1747-1774.” In this chapter, Carp importantly emphasises that ‘the waterfront was an integral (if not dominant) part of the larger urban setting.” He further adds that between the waterfront and the city “no rigid or formal boundary existed.” This may be the case, but I would contend that the wharves did have an esoteric spatial meaning to the port-city that is worth exploring. While Boston’s “contested waterfront space” which Carp observes in his chapter title is significant, his attention is concentrated on the ritual mob violence which appeared at the waterfront, but which would class his analysis less of a spatial history than it is cultural or social history. Overall, the focus of the above authors is more on the “waterfront community” and its rebellious, violent culture rather than the geographic space itself and the unease felt over disruptions to its functionality. By doing this, I do not discount, but attempt to compliment and aid social and cultural histories.

Another historian who has broached the subject of the early American waterfront directly is Emma Hart in a presentation entitled: “Port Cities or Global Cities, The View from the Water's Edge.” Working within the port-city as a framework, Hart makes use of a narrower waterfront focus and advocates for “a close comparison of port city wharves” making several important observations in doing so. First, she notes that wharves were “a place for receiving and shipping goods” and “sentries of exchange between land and water”. Adding to this, she also overlays that wharves acted as an imperial space with “administrative functions”. This view of the port facilitates as spaces for exchange and governance has great import for the

41 Bourne, Cradle of Violence.
43 Carp, 23–61.
44 Emma Hart, “Port Cities or Global Cities, The View from the Water’s Edge” (paper presented at Temple University, Philadelphia, 2015), 1-21.
historical study of empire in the early modern era. There is more to be done here, however. Although touched on by Hart, the meaning and spatial functionality of this space in the early modern era is worth expanding upon.

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To accomplish this investigation, I will combine visual and textual analysis, transposing the spatial framework of the urban waterfront given to us through prominent maps, paintings and engravings, and placing the events recounted in text sources into this built environment. Additionally, to get a material grasp on the built environment I will incorporate existing archaeological findings and analysis into my work, to get an idea about the construction of wharves and waterside structures, what they were made out of and their architectural permanency or impermanency. There are five forms of primary evidence which will be used here—three written and two visual. The three written forms will be: government documents, personal papers and newspapers. The two visual forms of evidence will be: cartographic—maps and town plans, and artistic—engravings and paintings of waterfront scenes. Written sources, complementing and locating events described in journals, correspondence and newspapers will be read against the backdrop of visual evidence. Such maps and visual sources exist for each port-city that I cover, artistic impressions of the waterfront have been illustrated by men such as Paul Revere and William Burgis. Colonial newspapers, printed in and centred on life in the port-cities, helpfully have a particular maritime and trading focus. These sources tend to look out to sea, note incoming and outgoing ships and merchandise (a core part to their informational function) depicting waterfront life in exceptional detail.45

The conceptual layout of the chapters of the thesis should also be noted. Part I (Chapter 1) will cover the built environment, laying out the scene upon which the rest of the thesis will be placed and by outlining the ownership, construction, and geography of waterfront infrastructure so as to better observe the import of this space. Part II (Chapters 2 and 3) will cover the local attempts to defend and protect waterfront space, with little imperial assistance, from ecological and biological destruction in relation to environmental disasters and disease prevention. For local actors—largely left to protect themselves and rebuild their cities without imperial subsidy, despite probable disruptive effects to larger imperial economic goals caused by—environmental hazards, disasters, and disease outbreaks all of which produced municipal crises illustrative of the duelling governance and threat perceptions of colonial port-town and metropole at the docks. Part III (Chapters 4 and 5) will cover the theme of the waterfront as a contested economic and governmental space in relation to the imperial enforcement of naval impressment and customs regulations. An ardent imperial desire to recruit for its Navy and profit from excise duties produced resolute attempts to govern waterfront goods and labour, but a defensive instinct to protect this space on the part of the multifaceted port-city interests present at the waterfront hindered this. While other important contests moved through the waterfront—such as the subversive activities of pirates, free blacks, and slaves—could also suitably demonstrate this uncertain governance, in terms of the explicit relation of events to the geographic region of the wharves, sources on impressment and customs procedure provide the most direct evidence.46

My first chapter and the first part of my analysis, on “The Built Environment of the Colonial Docks” gives a geographic survey of the waterfront infrastructure that will note the

similarities and differences between the six port-cities. This chapter will draw prominently on the history of architecture, urban planning and archaeology. In terms of urban planning, John W. Reps has conducted an in-depth survey of town-making and planning across colonial America, *The Making of Urban America*. Carville Earle and J. David Wood have also investigated town planning and development in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America. These works highlight the economic advantages of the waterfront and waterside property and the role of this in the placement and development of America’s cities. Supplementing this, it will take from prominent archaeological findings which have been conducted of the wharves, slips, and fortifications along the shoreline of these cities. These include: Nancy Seasholes for Boston; Anne Marie E. Cantwell and Paul R. Huey for New York; John L. Cotter for Philadelphia; and in Charleston, Jacqueline Don and Katherine Saunders.

In Chapter 2, I examine the material importance of this built environment by charting the course of events when this infrastructure was threatened, impeded, or destroyed. A wide variety of disasters and meteorological events could impede waterfront commerce in this precariously aged, including fires, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and snowstorms. Scholarship

tends to separate and sectionalise these ecological disasters. Collating these together, however, there emerges a multifaceted picture of both the environmental vulnerability of the wharves and their indispensability as a local public space and economic channel.

Looking at a different form of urban destruction, my third chapter looks at the enforcement of quarantine laws and issue of disease infiltration in these cities. Much of early American medical history is subsumed by early inoculation controversies in 1721 in Boston and 1738 in Charleston. Quarantine regulations and attempts to defend the waterfront from disease infiltration through the use of pest-houses or isolation hospitals on harbour islands are often passed over as an unsubstantial precursor to inoculation policies. John Duffy—a medical doctor by trade—in his prominent works on early American medicine and disease, writes very much from the perspective of the medical professional. Duffy demonstrates a preference for listing and categorising epidemics and uncovering methods of treatment, with only passing discussion of the effect of quarantine processes on urban life. Historians such as Stephen Coss and Ola Elizabeth Winslow (for Boston) and Marion Stange and Peter McCandless (for Charleston) have gone through town records on epidemics and public health. These historians have done what Duffy’s medical history did not and have managed to effectively link cause and effect, tracing the outbreak of diseases back to their maritime point-of-origin and relating

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these outbreaks to overarching economic interests and governmental systems. Following this
trend, I aim to incorporate political and economic contexts to show how quarantine regulations
operated at various scales. Introducing a spatial dimension can add further complexity,
however. Inspecting quarantine at the shoreline reveals a place of lasting communal
uncertainty, gripped by fear of the next contaminated maritime arrival. Viewed through the
prism of the function of the colonial waterfront, I argue, a strong protective ethic to shield the
docks from such a threat materialises in the port-city.

Turning then to the contested machinations of labour interests on the docks, I move to
look at Royal Navy impressment and desertion. In *Jack Tar vs. John Bull*, Jesse Lemisch
pioneered a bottom-up history of impressment with a distinct focus on sailors, and on labour
relations. It is primarily a piece of social history centred on one specific city, New York, seeing
violence in protest to impressment regulations as a prelude to the escalating resistance of the
American Revolution.  


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this, I contend that we must also note that vested interests in the built environment and waterfront commerce, not just the labourers themselves, sowed conflict. Linking such a study to environment, however, the stimulus of violent resistance becomes clearer.

Moving from conflicts over labour market security to the movement of goods markets, the final chapter examines dynamics of customs enforcement and smuggling. Thomas C. Barrow’s work on the British customs service has been helpful in the construction of my thesis. Barrow goes into significant detail on the various forces at work contesting and enforcing these acts. He contends that the customs service acted much like a “state-within-a-state”.56 Neil Stout’s work on the Royal Navy in America also sheds light on the Navy’s role in enforcing the Navigation Acts and the competition, tension and confused governance that it felt over the prosecution and condemnation of smuggling vessels.57 While these works give a great overview into the British Empire’s struggle to extinguish smuggling in America, what is lacking from these works is an on-the-ground analysis of these (usually violent) contests which took place over smuggling and customs duties. Taking up this mantle is Thomas Truxes, who shows the large social, political and economic institutions which protected and undertook smuggling activity. This analysis deals with and brings to the fore the everyday realities of smuggling around the wharves, but only in one specific city (New York) and in one relatively small timeframe (1756 to 1763).58 There is much room for the expansion of this type of analysis to different cities and larger timeframes and to delve deeper into the docks as the scene of these conflict. Gautham Rao’s book National Duties on custom-houses as an object of discourse in colonial and revolutionary America is also useful. His study shows how the customs house acted as a crucial administrative nexus and state apparatus that reified the importance of the

waterfront and incited battles for waterfront control over illicit trade.\textsuperscript{59} While his analysis of the custom-house specifically as a state apparatus is important for my waterfront survey, the waterfront is peripheral to his study. I find an exploration the waterfront transition which these custom-houses and their officers administrated to be equally, if not more broadly, valuable.

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By reframing the geographic scope of analysis, events on the waterfront can be better viewed within their localised spatial context. Through challenging spatial scope of traditional historical narratives, the disorderly elements of this space become more perceptible. Examining the waterfront as an isolated discursive object is a task rarely attempted by historians, particularly in pre-industrial contexts. The waterfront has generally been the object of study in geography, economics and urban planning. As a result, further attention is needed to explicate the waterfront’s function in historical context. This small-scale spatial lens will allow for a more in-depth exploration of the historical dynamics of power and control in regard to the enforcement of laws in this colonial space. Looking at this environment in isolation, we can distinguish its utility. The vast array of economic movements in the city can obscure the essential avenue of trade that is the docks. Identifying the waterfront as a ‘bottleneck’ for transportation and commerce offers a novel perspective that can adjust our view of imperial administration and complex issues of transatlantic shipping empires.

Giving this zone its due historical critique, I will make an intervention not just into the nature of the port-cities and the urban-maritime interface, but into the history of the British Empire and of eighteenth-century British America more generally. The waterfront almost

disappears as an object of analysis in discussion of urban space in the pre-industrial or early modern era. I see this as an oversight. My thesis will assert that in the Age of Sail—an Age particularly reliant on tenuous voyage of sailing vessels from commercial interaction—the docks hosted exchanges of fundamental consequence, both locally, and for imperial function. In a colonial setting, on the edge of the American continent, this space possessed even greater significance. By analysing the function of the colonial waterfront, I evaluate not just the extent but also the variety of difficulties faced by the British mercantilist state in this space. Negotiating and managing environmental hazards in a fragile colonial space as well as diverse economic and military interests over shipping and commerce, the forces of imperial administration struggled to enforce order and halt disruption. My thesis will update understandings of this era by applying geographic frameworks, not usually applied to pre-industrial port-cities, and thus, we can gain greater awareness of imperial priorities in the Age of Sail. I argue that this, in turn, evolve our views of the nature of governance and control in early modern imperial systems.
PART I

Constructing the Built Environment

Waterfront spaces differed vastly across the British Atlantic coast. Numerous variations occurred in population, extent of urban development, key trading commodities, docklands infrastructure and the investment and ownership of wharves. Therefore, to grasp this diversity and these environments which we will be examining intimately, we need to delve deeper and understand how these colonial waterfront spaces were funded, built, developed, and utilised. Comprehending this diversity, we may then better relate these spaces to the people, laws, and institutions that operated in the region.
To conduct an analysis of this transitional space across various American port towns, we first require an exploration of the infrastructure, or built environment, of the urban waterfront. We need to be able to highlight the differences and similarities of the built environment in each case, in order to analyse how people and commodities entered and exited these spaces and how this transition was governed. To do this, this chapter utilises a combination of visual and written documentary sources to produce a spatial imprint of these spaces, which will enable us to forge connections between the events described later in this thesis and the waterfront space in which they occurred.

It is useful to note the two archetypes of popular graphic production we will encounter. First, the artistic trope of engraved waterfront landscape scene, known as a town prospect or long-view, showing the perspective of a ship in the harbour, as if an onlooker is first arriving to see the city on the horizon. The consistent use of this harbour-based landscape perspective, encompassing the span of the waterfront and its infrastructure as a means of generating sentiments of pride and admiration in the viewers, speaks to the importance of the docks. The second common model are urban maps, which reliably feature the wharves prominently, many labelling each wharf as a distinct and noteworthy civic destination. In the same vein, the labelling of the docks, illuminates its primary place in the geographic conception of the city. Local merchants commissioned such pieces, often by joint-stock funding, so as to impress imperial authorities and demonstrate their claims to cityhood and their material prosperity. These artistic and cartographic representation of the port, predominate forms of art, connotes the importance of the waterfront in civic self-conception.\(^1\)

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Through a close examination of the format of these spaces, their representation, and the placement of economic and security apparatus—often torn between public and private ownership or between imperial and municipal jurisdiction—we can gain insight into why the waterfront became a site of anxiety and disputation.

New York

Figure 3 – John Carwitham, *A Plan of the City of New York*, c. 1740.
Figure 4 - Bernard Ratzer, Plan of the City of New York in North America, Surveyed in the Years 1766 & 1767, 1776.
Figure 5 - William Burgis, *A South Prospect of the Flourishing City of New York in the Province of New York, 1717.*
New York, founded as New Amsterdam as a Dutch colony, began development in 1625, before being sold to the English, and renamed New York in 1664. New Amsterdam had been placed between the Hudson River, which could be used as a gateway for inland colonial penetration and the East River, which allowed for coastal shipping up and down the Atlantic coast. This geography affected the layout of the waterfront.\(^2\) This meant that the city’s wharves negotiated shipping traffic on both sides of the island—the eastside wharves on the East River and the westside wharves on the Hudson River (Figures 4 and 5)—although the eastside wharves went through far more development, boasting better quality, upkeep and infrastructure. Waterfront property was much desired on both rivers.\(^3\) This dual river waterfront meant that, in Lower Manhattan, you were never more than several blocks from the waterfront. Initially imagined by both the Dutch and the English as more of a fortified township than a city, early colonial


Manhattan had developed initially in an almost medieval form, with asymmetrical, curving, irregularly laid-out streets, in stark contrast to the grid patterns of American port-cities that developed later in the century, such as Philadelphia, creating a more European-style chaotic environment.\(^4\)

The Dongan Charter of 1686 and the Montgomerie Charter of 1731 established full municipal control over all land located between the high and low water marks on the island. This meant that all the wharves in the city came under local governmental authority and were then leased out to wealthy merchants, generating an uneasy landlord-tenant relationship between local civic authorities and private owners (or ‘wharfingers’) and, in turn, a custom of negotiated use on New York’s waterfront.\(^5\) Cadwallader Colden described New York’s waterfront environment, in 1745:

> all along the shoar from one end of the Town to the other there is a continuation of wharfs to which the ships lay their sides except at the ends of those streets which run nearly perpendicular to the river & terminate upon the river where the wharfs are discontinued & Gaps left called Slips into which the Periaguas & small Vessels enter & unload & here at the ends of these streets the Market places are built.\(^6\)

Manhattan’s waterfront, as described by Colden, was configured as a series of quays and slips. The use of slips meant that vessels appeared to become part of the city proper when docking, ostensibly fusing ships into local port infrastructure. When docked at quays, ships anchored parallel to shore in a public space, but as the century wore on, increasing leases of “water lots” led to a more privatised system, with jutting finger-piers running perpendicular to the shore,

breaking the large quay blocks (Figs. 4 and 5). As Colden points out, five key waterfront markets, lay by the East River, each at the end of one of lower Manhattan’s main arterial streets and, unlike other British American cities, most of New York’s slips were built in the Dutch style, extending out from the streets. As evident in Bernard Ratzer’s 1767 map and William Burgis’ 1731 engraving (Figs. 5 and 6), at the end of Broad Street was an enclosed and protected “Great Dock”, with a pier in the middle. Either side of this wharf was simply known as “West Dock” and “East Dock”. The particularly important and spacious dock was kept in the public ownership and not sold into private hands. Eastside piers extended out from stone bulkhead (a seawall running parallel to the shore) were said to be built on “logs of wood upon a stone foundation.” While some port-cities invested heavily in the security and permanence of stone wharves—and other port-cities invested lightly in less permanent wooden wharves—New York’s key emerging system of wharves in the eighteenth century appeared to split the difference.

The military utility and necessity of Manhattan was never lost on imperial authorities, who maintained a heavy presence on New York’s waterfront. At the very southern tip of the island of Manhattan, acting as a partition between the waterfront spaces of the Hudson and East Rivers lay Fort George (Figure 7), a large and imposing military instalment, surveying the busy harbour under the guard of its cannons. Fort George came to represent an imperial presence in this fluctuating, negotiated procedure of waterside exchange. New York’s waterfront possessed plenty of waterfront space and developed in its infrastructure on both the Hudson and the East River. Importantly, its most distinctive features were: its gradual privatisation and its significant military presence, a situation which would generate substantial tension.

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8 Burrows and Wallace, Gotham, 125.
9 Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness, 24.
10 Rediker, Between the Devil, 66; Buttenwieser, Manhattan Water-bound, 33–4.
Boston

Figure 7 - William Faden, *Boston Its Environs and Harbour, with the Rebels Works Raised against that Town in 1775, 1778.*

Figure 8 - William Price, *A New Plan of ye Great Town of Boston in New England in America with the Many Additionall Buildings & New Streets, to the Year, 1769, 1769.*
Next, we travel to New England, to Boston, founded in 1630. Located on the Shawmut Peninsula with only a narrow, marshy neck to connect it to the mainland (Figure 8), Boston was almost island-like in its configuration, making it an ideal location for 360 degrees of seaborne trade and waterfront expansion.\textsuperscript{12} Its streets were based off the unruly London model. Consequently, Boston did not implement a systematic or logical scheme when it came to the

\textsuperscript{12} Reps, \textit{Making of Urban America}, 140.
layout of its streets, meaning that people and houses were packed together in tightly confined spaces. The city of Boston and its wharves were inseparable and the embrace of London-style urban disorder made for a more anarchic waterfront sector.\textsuperscript{13} By 1742, 166 individual wharves formed a large arc across Boston’s harbour. The hub of this series of heavy built-up wharves was the “Long Wharf”.\textsuperscript{14} The Long Wharf was a public wharf, a joint-stock endeavour between key Bostonian merchants and officials. Completed in 1715 and constructed of solid granite. Archaeological estimates calculate the wharf to be 1,562 feet long in the eighteenth century and capable of accommodating up to thirty ships on one side alone.\textsuperscript{15} Daniel Neal, in 1720, described that the Long Wharf “runs so far into the Bay, that Ships of the greatest Burthen may unlade without the Help of Boats or Liters.”\textsuperscript{16} Neal added that the wharf had “a Row of Warehouses on the North Side,” as is clearly visible in the engravings of John Carwitham and Paul Revere (Figs. 10 and 11).\textsuperscript{17} The joint-stock ownership in such a large stonework structure made this a substantial town-wide investment and a point of possessive communal interest for Bostonians.

Many of Boston’s most prominent wharves replicated this layout, with one side dedicated to docking space for ships, and the other side housing significant civic infrastructure: warehouses, counting houses, taverns and private homes.\textsuperscript{18} This was a lived and walked space, blending commercial, social, and domestic lives. On many of Boston’s prominent piers, social and economic infrastructure seeped and spread out into the built environment extending out from the shore—a testament to the sense of military security from seaward threats felt in Boston.

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{13} Bridenbaugh, \textit{Cities in the Wilderness}, 9; James D. Kornwolf, \textit{Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial North America}, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 959.
\item\textsuperscript{14} Work Projects Administration, \textit{Boston Looks Seaward: The Story of the Port, 1630-1940} (Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1941), 41; Kornwolf, \textit{Architecture and Town Planning}, 2:962.
\item\textsuperscript{15} Seasholes, \textit{Gaining Ground}, 31; Kornwolf, \textit{Architecture and Town Planning}, 2:959.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Daniel Neal, \textit{History of New England Containing an Impartial Account of the Civil and Ecclesiastical Affairs of the Country, to the Year of Our Lord, 1700} (London: J. Clark, 1720), 2:587.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{18} WPA, \textit{Boston Looks Seaward}, 1.
\end{itemize}
The sense of military safety is understandable. A traveller, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, claimed that they could feel “better fortified against an enemy than any port in North America.” The heavy cannons of Castle William, an impressive well-armed military fortification on Castle Island (Figure 8) across the harbour, prepared to face down incoming threats long before they reached the docks. Unlike New York, this harbour island-based fortification also provided a sense of autonomy and a slight sense of imperial distance to Boston’s disordered encirclement of piers. Also, like many of the ports surveyed in this thesis, Boston had an array of small islands around the mouth of its harbour, such as Spectacle Island and Bird Island (Figure 8) which came to be used as quarantine stations to halt and regulate waterfront traffic. In its commodious harbour, the city of Boston possessed an advanced, developed and urbanised waterfront—comprising a densely-packed, chaotic, built-up waterfront world. Its significant public-private investment and both its sense of protection and its distance for security infrastructure, gave its waterfront operations a small, but important, relative sense of autonomy from imperial and military oversight.

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Figure 11 - Charles Blaskowitz, *A Plan of the Town of Newport in Rhode Island*, 1777.

Figure 12 - John Mumford, *Copie of a Drought of the Town of Newport*, 1712.
Another New England town, formed shortly after Boston in 1639, was Newport, Rhode Island. Eighteenth-century Newport is best described as a “seaport town”. Newport is not the largest of the ports in this study, never quite matching the size and strength of cities like Boston or New York, but it nevertheless experienced massive growth during the eighteenth century, with its population rising from around 2,200 in 1708 to 9,200 in 1774.\textsuperscript{21} Due to its outstanding reputation for expertise in trading and seafaring and its important position as a transhipping entrepôt for British vessels, its functions as a port were of increasing significance within the colonial American trading system.\textsuperscript{22} The town’s focus, its life, its economy, and its layout all looked invariably seaward. Male occupations in Newport were primarily either mercantile or maritime, with over a quarter of its working male population in maritime professions.\textsuperscript{23} As the maps of both John Mumford and Charles Blaskowitz illustrate (Figs. 12 and 13), the city’s streets were designed in the ‘L’-shape curving to fit closer to the docks and running parallel to the curvature of the marshy harbour. Wherever you went within the bounds of the city during the colonial era, you were never much more than a couple of blocks from the shoreline. Dr. Alexander Hamilton in 1747 described Newport as “consisting of one street … just close upon the water”—this street being Thames Street. The mercantile centre of the port-city, running along the shoreline, Thames Street dominated trade and business.\textsuperscript{24}

In the first half of the century, the piers of colonial Newport still consisted mostly of wood, a result of a simple lack of investment capital in the smaller seaport town.\textsuperscript{25} But as Newport underwent massive urban growth, by the 1750s town merchants began an ambitious waterfront development project, to make the town look and function more like its larger neighbour, Boston. Additionally, the city’s merchant class placed more and more houses,

\begin{savenotes}
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\textsuperscript{21} Krawczynski, \textit{Daily Life}, 17.
\textsuperscript{22} Withey, \textit{Urban Growth}, 29.
\textsuperscript{23} Krawczynski, \textit{Daily Life}, 18.
\textsuperscript{24} Elaine Crane, \textit{A Dependent People: Newport in the Revolutionary Era} (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 49–50.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 48.
\end{footnotes}
\end{savenotes}
warehouses and marketplaces on top of the town’s pier and leasing these buildings out in search of greater returns on investment. Linked to the size and capacity of its wharves, came the port’s claim to cityhood and mercantile competitiveness within the imperial system. The town’s rapid expansion, increasingly funded by illicit capital from the profits of smuggling, prompted a rush on waterfront improvements, resulting in a deluge of local corporate activity. In the middle of the wharf, a drawbridge allowed entry and exit into the Cove. Newport’s Long Wharf finished its initial stage of construction in 1685 as a public wharf, thirty years before Boston’s Long Wharf was commissioned. Infighting over laws governing the wharf, however, marred its early days, leading it to fall into disrepair. Although meant as a public convenience, the process of wharf degradation and restoration drew the attentions of the city into this space. In 1753, proprietors voted to build what was called the “Brick Market” at the base of Long Wharf, like the wharf this was a solid structure and a point of pride, compounding the significance of the Long Wharf to the movements of commerce through the town. Not far out into the harbour, visible in John Mumford’s map (Figure 13), Goat Island housed the main fortification and security for the port, Fort Walcott (later Fort George) which performed a similar imperial and military function to Castle William, inculcated similar senses of both safety and commercial autonomy in waterside conduct. Newport’s waterfront was never as expansive, impressive or urbanised as Boston or New York, but its compact, sea-oriented structure and its transient maritime population made for disordered waterside scenes.

Charleston

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27 James, Colonial Metamorphoses, 155.
Figure 14 - Edward Crisp, *A Plan of the Town & Harbour of Charleston*, 1711.

Figure 15 - George Hunter, *The Ichnography of Charles-Town at High Water*, 1739.
After some turbulent early attempts at settlement, Charleston was established in its current location in 1680, commissioned by the powerful Carolina proprietor, Lord Shaftesbury. Conceived shortly after the Great Fire of London, Charleston as well as many other British colonial cities which followed, was created as a grid (Figure 14), reflecting the new urban idea we now call the “urban renaissance”. Known as the “Grand Modell”, it was laid out by Sir John Yeamans “into regular streets,” that were “large and capacious,” forming a trapezoid with eight square blocks. While this was meant to promote orderly trading processes at the waterfront, an ordered transition did not eventuate. Similar to New York, Charleston was planned and developed at the fork of two important rivers, the Ashley and the Cooper. But, in Charleston’s case, it is only the eastside waterfront that was occupied, fortified and available for docking. This meant that, unlike the cases we have seen so far, there could be a sheer lack of space for waterfront docking procedures. Notably, Charleston had very few wharves. Its wharves, however, were built from solid stone. These wharves, in fact, were called “bridges”, eight of them by the end of the 1730s, according to George Hunter’s map of the city (Figure 15). With so few wharves, each had to be large and wide and had to fill numerous large roles—

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30 Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness*, 12.
as marketplace, storehouse, social hub and docking space. Its busiest wharf, “Middle Bridge”, housed its own marvellous two-storey market-house, known simply as ‘the Exchange’, its magnificence pridefully displayed in Thomas Leech’s 1774 painting (Figure 16). While canoes and small watercraft consistently populated the waterfront in great numbers, comprising what Governor James Glen referred to as “a floating market”. While Charlestonians wished their wharves to have a large level of permanence and solidity, the notion of a “floating market” denotes that the few wharves, though wide and multifunctional, could not accommodate or keep up with the pace of colonial commerce in Charleston, with trade spilling out into any available waterfront space, even as small a space as a canoe. What was created was a chaotic, insecure, multiracial, amphibious space.

Built right under the nose of the Spanish territory of Florida, the population of Charleston was petrified of a large-scale Spanish invasion from its inception. To meet security demands, huge stone walls enclosed the city, giving it a look more like a fortress than a port town. Unlike Boston and Newport’s island fortresses or lower Manhattan’s “Battery”, Charleston’s military protection—complete with cannons and bastions—surrounded the entire city (Figure 14). After having been subject to seaborne invasion by the French, the Spanish, as well as the formidable pirate armada of the notorious Blackbeard, it is understandable that the waterfront came to be a source of considerable anxiety for some Charlestonian leaders. Furthermore, although all the colonial towns that we have analysed so far had slave populations, Charleston, was first and foremost a slave port. The multiracial character of the docks—heavily populated with slave traffic and free black labourers—infused this space with

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a sense of risk and anxiety in an uneasy battle to maintain white control. This fortified city with few wharves had the look of a castle, but remained an insecure built environment. While durability and longevity of stone infrastructure appeared necessary in sub-tropical conditions, due to limited expenses and various anxieties over black labour and foreign threats, commercial traffic in Charleston spilled out into the floating market of the harbour.

Philadelphia

Figure 17 - Thomas Holme, *A Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia in the Province of Pennsylvania in America*, 1683.

Figure 13 - John Gibson, *A Plan of the City of Philadelphia, with the Country Adjacent*, 1769.

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Figure 19 - George Heap, An East Prospect of the City of Philadelphia, 1768.
Figure 20 - Nicholas Scull, To the Mayor, Recorder, Aldermen, Common Council, and Freeman of Philadelphia, this Plan of the Improved Part of the City Surveyed and Laid Down by the Late Nicholas Scull, 1762.
Founded in 1682, not long after Charleston had been laid out, Philadelphia exuded order and rationality in its geometrically-pleasing grid system, sticking to the plan imagined by William Penn and his architect Thomas Holme (Figure 17). Philadelphia, like New York, bordered two rivers, the Schuylkill and the Delaware; but the city was situated not at the fork of these rivers, but rather on a large stretch of land upward of the fork (Figure 18). Far from the density of other port-cities, Philadelphia was planned as a large city with a centre of life that could be away from the waterfront. With trade entering from both the Delaware and the Schuylkill, the public square in the centre of its grid took on a greater significance (Figures 17 and 18), as intended by Holme, took some of the town’s cultural and economic focus away from the waterfront. Nevertheless, Philadelphia’s experienced extraordinary expansion in the eighteenth century, nowhere was this more apparent than dockside, where it underwent more waterfront construction than any other American port.\footnote{Theodore Thayer, “Town into City, 1746-1765,” in Philadelphia: A 300 Year History, ed. Russell Weigley (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1982), 74.}

The Delaware, much like the East River in New York, provided great access to the ocean, and thus, was a more popular place than the Schuylkill to lay down wharves, markets and property.\footnote{Gary B. Nash, The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.} The town’s deep water wharves spanned a wide distance across the Delaware, as seen in the George Heap engraving and the Nicholas Scull map (Figures 19 and 20).\footnote{Thayer “Town into City,” 74.} Both rivers had plenty of space for ships to spread themselves thinly across the wide riverfront; thus, avoiding a hazardous clutter of ships competing for the same wharf space which affected other ports. With a wide breadth of riverfront available to develop, a long horizontal line of adjacent smaller wharves and slips on both sides of the city emerged in Philadelphia, with little pressing need perceived for a longer public wharf or a large commodious dock.\footnote{Rediker, Between the Devil, 70–2.} The multiplicity of
smaller, private wharves split across two riverfronts made for a more individualistic sense of wharfside property rights and less communal waterfront trading culture.

Importantly, Philadelphia, as opposed to the other key British ports surveyed in this analysis, was located significantly inland, meaning that ships had to be guided up the river by Delaware riverboat pilots. This section of the journey upriver or downriver between Philadelphia’s docks and the wide-open Atlantic was often a treacherous feat, but also an extra level of protection and shelter for Philadelphia.39 Unusually for colonial America, Philadelphia possessed barely any military security apparatus; a small battery just downstream on the Delaware provided the only fortification. This affords us a key indicator of Philadelphia’s perception of its relative safety from seaborne invaders—not only inland but far away from the Franco-British imperial frontier regions of the North Atlantic, the Great Lakes and the Deep South.40 Its inland status made Philadelphia simultaneously feel more sheltered and secure, but also shouldered it with the burdens of river piloting. Its dual waterfront created greater trading opportunities but split its waterfront focus in two spacious riverfront sectors forming a formidable array of small, privately-owned piers.

40 Thayer, “Town into City,” 103; Alan Houston, Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 98.
Kingston

Figure 21 – Michael Hay, *Plan of Kingston / to His Excellency Edward Trelawny, Esqr., Captain, General Governor & Commander in Chief of His Majesty’s Island of Jamaica & the Territories*, c. 1745.

Figure 22 - Richard Jones, *A Correct Draught of the Harbours of Port Royal and Kingston in Jamaica with the Fortifications Correctly Laid Down, Also All the Keys and Shoals Adjacent*, 1756.
Travelling now to the Caribbean, we find a deeply significant port-city on the south coast of Jamaica. Kingston began its life much later than many of the North American cities we have covered, founded in 1692, and was designed in the same grid system as Charleston and Philadelphia. From its inception, the beachfront and wharf region provided the locus of life of Kingston. The indelibly impermanent built environment at Kingston’s waterfront, at the mercy of the Caribbean climate (susceptible to tropical diseases and natural disasters), had rendered heavy investment in tougher structures a futile endeavour. Thus, Kingston’s wharves were unassuming wooden structures built by driving piles into the sea and filling in the surrounds with rocks and dirt, a result of the severe lack of capital investment for infrastructure in the Caribbean colonies. According to Michael Hay’s map, by the mid-eighteenth-century,

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fourteen had been built (Figure 21). Kingston’s wharves were not privately owned but administered by public wharfingers. These public wharves were closely regulated and scrutinised. But while public wharves diminished the threat of privately-led mercantile subversion, government-run oversight of valuable waterfront exchanges set the stage for corruption amongst wharfingers.\footnote{The Laws of Jamaica: Comprehending All the Acts in Force, Passed Between the Thirty-Second Year of the Reign of Charles the Second and the Thirty-Third Year of the Reign of King George the Third (St Jago de la Vega: Alexander Aikman, 1792), 3:445.} Shipping logs attest to Kingston’s incredible growth, showing that, by 1744, 89 per cent of ships arriving in Jamaica docked at Kingston first.\footnote{Trevor Burnard, “Kingston, Jamaica: Crucible of Modernity,” in The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 130.}

Hay’s map depicts the realities of docking at the waterfront. With substantial tonnage of shipping and wharves limited in quantity and quality, most ships sought anchorage in the harbour, where the unloading and reloading process could be onerously undertaken via rowboats. Much like Charleston, these large numbers of beached rowboats, canoes and small vessels, as illustrated by Hay, played the essential role of moving from ship to shore and animating the circulation of goods and people. With wholesale goods distribution confined below Harbour Street, the majority of commercial activity took place close to the foreshore. Port Royal Street, which ran along the beachside, being the hub of this movement. In 1745, fifty of the town’s ninety merchandising stores are recorded on this street.\footnote{Clarke, Kingston, Jamaica, 15; Hornsby, British Atlantic, American Frontier, 190–1; Trevor Burnard and Emma Hart, “Kingston, Jamaica, and Charleston, South Carolina: A New Look at Comparative Urbanization in Plantation Colonial British America,” Journal of Urban History 39, no. 2 (2012): 222.} The minimal built environment led to the incorporation of the beach and created an unfocused waterfront exchange, sprawled across a wide and difficult to govern space.\footnote{Burnard, “Not a Place for Whites,” 231–2; Denver Brunsman, The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth Century. (Charlottesville, V.A.: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 204.} Here, Kingston’s waterfront market fuelled the port.\footnote{John Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West-Indies; In His Majesty's Ships the Swallow and Weymouth. Describing Several Islands and Settlements (Scarborough: Caesar Ward and Richard Chandler, 1735), 244.}

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\textquote{The Laws of Jamaica: Comprehending All the Acts in Force, Passed Between the Thirty-Second Year of the Reign of Charles the Second and the Thirty-Third Year of the Reign of King George the Third (St Jago de la Vega: Alexander Aikman, 1792), 3:445.}


\textquote{Clarke, Kingston, Jamaica, 15; Hornsby, British Atlantic, American Frontier, 190–1; Trevor Burnard and Emma Hart, “Kingston, Jamaica, and Charleston, South Carolina: A New Look at Comparative Urbanization in Plantation Colonial British America,” Journal of Urban History 39, no. 2 (2012): 222.}

\textquote{Burnard, “Not a Place for Whites,” 231–2; Denver Brunsman, The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth Century. (Charlottesville, V.A.: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 204.}

\textquote{John Atkins, A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West-Indies; In His Majesty's Ships the Swallow and Weymouth. Describing Several Islands and Settlements (Scarborough: Caesar Ward and Richard Chandler, 1735), 244.}
whims of tropical disease and weather events, made settler colonial governance exceedingly difficult.

Kingston’s beachfront functioned as a valuable, yet fragile, point of exchange for its key export, sugar, and its key import, slaves. Throughout Kingston’s growth, from a village settlement of fewer than 5,000 in 1702 to a thriving port of 14,200 by 1774, Africans always constituted a majority and masses of Africans, free and unfree, were a constant at the waterfront.\textsuperscript{49} In terms of security, white troops were in short supply and high mortality rates meant that the Admiralty only felt comfortable keeping small permanent garrisons in Jamaica. Of the infantry assigned to Kingston Harbour, 90 per cent were stationed at Port Royal, across the harbour (Figures 22 and 23), which also housed all of the harbour’s fortifications and naval presence.\textsuperscript{50} Once Jamaica’s primary port-town, after its utter destruction in an earthquake in 1692 and the establishment of Kingston in 1702, Port Royal became more of a military outpost—consisting of the naval dockyards and military barracks, Fort Charles—it came to integrated into Kingston’s urban sphere and served to protect its commercial interests.\textsuperscript{51} Kingston’s profitability and its majority black population paired with this dislocated military protection added to its sense of anxiety and vulnerability in an already volatile Caribbean environment.

\textbf{Conclusion}

From the wintry urban centre of Boston to the chaotic Caribbean slave port of Kingston, the built environment of the colonial American waterfront came in a variety of different layouts, constructions and contested ownerships. Now that we have elucidated these six individual

\textsuperscript{49} Clarke, \textit{Kingston, Jamaica}, 6.


\textsuperscript{51} Petition to H.M., September 10, 1703, in \textit{CSPC 1702-1703}, no. 1082; Michael Pawson and David Buissere, \textit{Port Royal, Jamaica} (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 1974), 169-71.
spaces, we can begin to look closely at the networks of imperial governance and the governance issues which plagued these spaces. Analysing this governance, I will argue that the British American waterfront presents itself to us as a space of contact and conflict which could disturb the British state’s mercantilist operations.
PART II

Protecting the Built Environment

The built environment of the waterfront had great significance to the citizens of urban America. However, this was a space which required defence and protection. Importantly, imperial forces in London largely left the issues of constructing and protecting colonial docks, to port-city locals—fortifications and security were provided for military protection against rival powers, but against the environment no funding for protection, oversight, or reconstruction efforts. Whether from manmade environmental threats, natural disasters or from the scourge of disease infiltration, townspeople did all they could to shield themselves from harm at the hands of harsh environments, as well as protecting the infrastructure, which as seen in the previous chapter, they had significantly invested their livelihoods in.
Port-cities relied for their continued prosperity and existence on the vital movement of goods shipments from a ship’s hold to a wholesaling warehouses on the shoreline, and then, via retail distribution into the city. Any damage incurred to the vessels, merchandise, infrastructure, or the progress of business at the waterfront was a serious matter. But urban citizens, the same as their compatriots on the frontier, were forced to negotiate regularly with the harsh environment of the Americas. In the colonial context, only rudimentary defence from the ruinous and inhibitive forces of nature could be mounted. As an essential node for exchange and supply, the waterfront often became a site of great unease, and often inspiring an ardent determination to shield its infrastructure and processes from any damage. The immediate necessity of quarantine regulations ingrained citizens of the colonial port-city with a cautious and defensive stance on the wharves which reified the sense of possession felt over this sector by locals.

**Fires**

Fire posed a consistent and potent threat to the local wharves and wharfside life. As Jill Lepore has stated: “fire was the greatest danger facing an early modern city.”¹ In Matthew Mulcahy’s words, fire constituted “the major scourge of all early modern cities,” and as he points out, the risk faced by the outbreak of fire in American towns “actually worsened over the course of the eighteenth century as more and more people crowded into the port cities.”² Zooming in a little, however, it becomes evident that the waterfront area presented a particular danger, generally

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storing wholesale and industrial quantities of pitch, tar, gunpowder, alcohol, and timber. With these goods, surrounded by clusters of private houses, artisanal workshops, and wooden ships, this area could resemble a tinderbox, igniting and spreading blazes at a formidable pace. Thus, the danger of fire consistently unnerved waterfront investors and residents.

Some fires wrought only minor or contained damage, but the fears that these breakouts unleash informs us as to the everyday economic reliance on this space. In Boston, on 8 January 1722, the Long Wharf played host to a minor conflagration which caught alight the sails of several ships, burnt three warehouses and caused others to be pulled down to prevent further damage. The damage was minimal, but the fear it incited was enough to provoke action. At their next meeting, the Boston Selectmen voted to immediately move one of the town’s new fire engines directly onto a permanent position on the Long Wharf, right next to the warehouse of the treasurer of the colony. On the morning of January 31, 1724, a similar incident took place on Clarke’s Wharf in North Boston; this time not only consuming a warehouse but the rigging on some adjacent ships as well. In the following months, Boston created its first Mutual Fire Society—consisting of twenty volunteers—and appointed Elias Townshend as a permanent foreman of the Society. The Pennsylvania Gazette reported on Philadelphia’s first major fire in April 1730, which totally engulfed Fishbourn’s Wharf, spreading across every single warehouse on the wharf and doing damage to dockside infrastructure of approximately £5000. Immediately, the Common Council of Philadelphia set about purchasing more fire engines and recruiting a larger band of volunteer firefighters. The concern for protecting the

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3 George P. Little, The Fireman’s Own Book: Containing Accounts of Fires Throughout the United States, as Well as Other Countries (Boston: Dillingham and Bragg, 1850), 136.
5 Little, The Fireman’s Own Book, 137.
6 Records of Boston Selectmen, 1716-1736, 124; Brayley, History of the Boston Fire Department, 39–40.
waterfront warehouses and stores, first and foremost, became patently evident in the case of these wharf fires.

While the burning of vessels had been narrowly avoided in these cases, with naked flames, lanterns, and gunpowder stores aboard, the city’s fears of the destruction of its maritime and trading vessels was not an unwarranted concern. In Charleston Harbour in December 1731, the Britannia, a large brigantine owned by a Rhode Island merchant is said to have been burnt accidentally while lying in dock at Elliot’s Wharf.\(^9\) Similarly, in Boston in 1743, the Navy vessel HMS Astrea is told to have been completely burnt and destroyed in Boston Harbour while anchored by the docks. The cause of this blaze, however, remains a mystery.\(^10\) While incidents of ships—both mercantile and naval—catching flame appears a rarity, these events went right to the core of local fears, undermining the stability and safety of dockside anchorages.

The Great Fire of Charleston in 1740 represented a city-wide catastrophe, with its effects felt most strongly in the waterfront sector. One account of the fire comes from the South Carolina Gazette where Elizabeth Timothy (who had inherited the editorship after her husband’s death in 1738) wrote “a Fire broke out in this Town at two o’Clock in the Afternoon, which consumed the Houses from Broad street to Church street down to Granville’s, Bastion, (which was the most valuable Part of the Town on Account of the Buildings and Trade).”\(^11\) The houses described are the front two blocks of houses nearest to the water. Timothy places special emphasis on the wharfside region as “the most valuable Part of the Town” as provided by its “Trade”. The account of local merchant Robert Pringle, writing to a business colleague, similarly paid much attention to the damage to trading goods and betrays a particular focus on dockside commercial investments. He expressed deep regrets to his colleague at the loss of a

\(^9\) South-Carolina Gazette, 8 January 1732.
\(^11\) South-Carolina Gazette, 13 November 1740.
warehouse full of recently offloaded goods at the docks by a fellow merchant. As his house burnt to the ground, he writes, and the entire waterfront set ablaze, a vessel braved to come down to the wharf. He dramatically relates how he and his wife “very narrowly Escap’d being … burnt there with our Lives, before [the ship] gott off from the Wharf.” This course of events explicates the waterfront’s function as a means of movement and departure, or escape in this case, and reiterates the significance of access to this amphibious route. Pringle gave another lengthy account in a letter to a different business partner, this time going into more thorough detail of how the fire:

Lay’d in Ashes Two Thirds of the Town & much the most valuable & Tradeing part thereof, about Three Hundred Dwelling Houses being Consum’d besides a great number of Storehouses, some of the Wharfs, and an Immense Quantity of Goods & Merchandize of all Sorts, the Value in Merchandize only being Computed at Two Hundred Thousand Pounds Sterling … It was Lucky for the Shipping that it was near high water & in the Day time, the otherwise they had all Likewise been destroy’d.

The Gazette’s damage survey and Pringle’s tale of personal escape, each focused on the wharves as objects of serious deliberation, each reveal how the waterfront was routinely granted a fundamental position in the town’s self-conception, representing mobility, prosperity, and commercial wellbeing.

In addition to these economic anxieties surrounding the Great Fire, naval and security matters around the harbour form a considerable part of the town’s panic in its aftermath. The actions of the Governor and naval and militia commanders uncover the town’s need for reassurance that the waterfront was under imperial protection, could be defended and that it would soon be safe to resume commercial operations. The Gazette’s account notes:

13 Pringle, 1:272.
the Assistance given by the Commanders of his Majesty’s Ships was very considerable in pulling down and blowing up Houses, and particularly by extinguishing the Fire in Granville’s Bastion, where Part of the Platform was consumed, and some of the Gun Carriages … the Militia was ordered under Arms, and proper Guards placed in several Part of the Town, to prevent the Embezzling any of the Sufferers Goods, which were saved from the Flames. There was a Detachment from each of his Majesty’s Ships Phenix, Tartar, and Spence on Shore; and a Party of Twenty Troopers patrolled all Night up … to Quarter-House and round the Town.  

The provision of military security took on a particular urgency in 1740 as Britain and Spain traded blows in the War of Austrian Succession and Charleston could sense the imminent peril resulting from their geographic proximity to Spanish settlements in Florida. Given this, attention was given to Charleston’s defensive fortifications, which warranted a large section of aggrieved prose. In particular, the key structure in Charleston’s arsenal, Granville’s Bastion—jutting out into the harbour at the eastern extremity of the city, with its guns facing out into the sea—triggered much panic. Authorities made its preservation and protection an immediate priority amidst the firefighting effort, prompting the use of naval crews to put out the blaze there. The expression of a fear of theft, and role of militia patrols in guarding against it, illustrates the overlapping goals of locals to regain security assurances as well as to overcome the commercial instability prompted by the levelling of the waterfront.

On top of this, the city’s majority black population gave Charlestonians a different reason for alarm. Pringle concludes his letter with a nervous thought of a black uprising against white authority. He comments that a “strict” guard of militia and naval troopers is kept constantly in the wake of the fire, due to “the great Risque we Run from an Insurrection of our

14 South-Carolina Gazette, 13 November 1740.
Negroes."¹⁵ Slave rebellion had always been the worst nightmare of white society in Charleston. Much like the dread of Spanish invasion, the levelling of the waterside brought these fears racing to the surface. With the scorching of the waterfront, the town’s concern for military security demonstrates the vital defensive role of this region, and the ingrained imperative to save or salvage it for this reason. To avoid such economic and security risks from reaching such a crisis point again, Charlestonians looked to upgrade its “floating market” and set about legislating for the reconstruction of their city with brick, and not wood, a demonstration of the extent of this insecurity and local dedication to its mitigation.¹⁶ One of the few cases of colonial disasters to make it into the records of Parliament, the House of Commons voted to the colony a sum of £20,000.¹⁷ This was the only time in colonial American history where Parliament granted direct governmental relief funding to a colonial city.¹⁸

A series of ten fires, alleged to have been lit by a rebellious faction in Manhattan in 1741, set fire to symbols of authority across the city, often around the waterfront. The first of these arson attacks arose in military and commercial targets. On 17 March, fire consumed Fort St. George at the water’s edge in lower Manhattan, then, exactly a week later, the conspirators set alight a dockside warehouse and a local ship captain’s residence, and, on 1 April, the bustling commercial hub of the Fly Market on the East River. We should not dismiss these particular locations for arson as a complete accident, these were surely chosen specifically to inspire the maximum reaction of terror in the city. The perpetrator or perpetrators involved ignited these fires to ravage points of commercial and military importance. Further, the supposed instigators of those arsons included a large portion of the city’s black populace

¹⁸ Mulcahy, “The ’Great Fire,’” 136.
inciting the same fears of black rebellion that had come to the fore in Charleston’s fire six months previous.\textsuperscript{19}

Another ‘Great Fire’, this time in Boston, broke out on 20 March 1760. As in Charleston, concern for wharfside goods and structures take primary place in accounts of the fire. Even the more permenant foundations of Boston’s urban infrastructure did not hold up, one witness wrote that: “Brick-Warehouses towards the Long Wharf, were considerably damag’d.” He charts the fire’s course from “Pudding Lane, to the Water’s Edge,” now being completely “in Ashes”. “Besides which,” he continues “a large Ship, Capt. Eddy late Master, lying at Col. Wendell’s Wharf, and two or three Sloops and a Schooner were burnt, on laden with Wood, and another with Stores of considerable Value.” Returning to commercial losses, the journalist turns to the “large Stores near the Wharves … wherein were Merchandizes of all Kinds, West-India Goods, Rum, Wine, Provisions, Salt, Cordage, Sails, Rigging; and the Stocks of a great many will be scarce able to retrieve it, and which the Town will feel the Effects of for many Years”\textsuperscript{20} Even in a sermon by Jonathan Mayhew of Boston’s West End, the docks and warehouses warranted a public mourning. Mayhew drew on this specific recent anguish of this loss at the waterfront, in a fiery speech at the pulpit, recalling how the fire had spread “till it reached the water” and engulfed “the wharfs, with several vessels lying at them.” He then moved to recite biblical verse to the assembled congregation: “We may now, with sufficient propriety, adopt the word of the Psalmist, and apply them to our own calamitous circumstances, “Come, behold the works of the Lord “what desolation he hath made in the earth.””\textsuperscript{21} As the flames subsided in the weeks following, local remembrance of this fire reveals


\textsuperscript{20} Newport Mercury, 25 March 1760.

\textsuperscript{21} Jonathan Mayhew, \textit{God’s Hand and Providence to Be Religiously Acknowledged in Public Calamities. A Sermon Occasioned by the Great Fire in Boston, New-England} (Boston: Draper, Edes & Gill, and Fleet, 1760), 18–19.
a horrified fascination with wharves, warehouses, and merchandise, with these factors taking priority in the listing and recounting of the public and private damage calculation.

In a dramatic case of waterfront arson in 1762, a slave by the name of Fortune, abandoned by his master, directly and unmistakably targeted Newport’s Long Wharf. The cost of repairs to the wharf is estimated at £80,000. This act combined the deep-seated fears of arson and slave rebellion with similarly recurrent fears of disorder in the waterfront marketplace to prompt an abrupt punitive reaction. The Governor had the slave jailed and a month later hanged at Newport’s gallows, which were, tellingly, erected by the wharves. In this case, more than any incident of fire in this period, the wharf became a specific target for arson. Fortune’s exact motives remain unclear, but it is possible that the Long Wharf’s role as first point of offloading and sale for slaves arriving in Newport drove his choice of location. For whatever reason, symbolic or pragmatic, this action of specifically attempting to burn the infrastructure of Newport’s primary wharf structure speaks to its centrality in the society and economy of the colonial city.

Finally, a fire at Champney’s Wharf in Charleston in 1770 neatly illustrates the value placed in waterfront infrastructure. The fire is said to have “violently scorched and had like to have finished our elegant Exchange.” The “Exchange” meant the waterside market building on East Bay Street (Figure 16). For Charlestonians, this building epitomised both economic prosperity and cultural ideals of refinement and civilisation; the threat to the Exchange challenged both practical and idealistic objectives. Henry Laurens expressed dismay that the fire “threaten’d the Destruction of all the Shipping, Wharves, Stores, and sumptuous Edifices,

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East, South, and West of them.” As similarly exhibited in all these urban conflagrations, Laurens prioritises the safety of harbour facilities—ships, goods, waterside marketplaces, and the wharves themselves—their preservation evidently take paramount importance, with any threat producing deep uneasiness among local residents.

**Hard Winters and Blizzards**

In northern port-cities, colonial townspeople faced another great environment challenge—the ancient struggle with the ice and snow of winter. The particular circumstance of colonial cities, far from the metropole and dependent on shaky lines of communication and shipping, meant that this battle with the elements took on a renewed significance. Blizzards and snowstorms could do exceptional damage to the waterfront environment, not only putting a stop to work and trade, but high winds did severe damage to buildings, ships, wharves, and goods. Furthermore, as Gary Nash points out “even in the southernmost of northern ports, ice frequently blocked maritime traffic.” The variable risks of winter troubled the minds of all port-city denizens alike, as they awaited the resumption of business. In the case of ice cover, the littoral movement of shipping in and out of the docks, and thus, flows of trade, communication and transportation could come to a complete halt in wintertime. Icing not only prevented ships from entering the waterfront, but ice floes posed a danger to any ships that wished to brave the waters of the harbour. Ice floes could move fast, be tricky to navigate around, and if they crashed into a vessel, they could hit with some force. In New York, ships

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27 Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 5.
would be forced to find an ice-free retreat, either upriver to Turtle Bay or out of the harbour entirely, in Sandy Hook Bay. In Boston and Newport, vessels routinely had to anchor themselves around their respective harbour islands. Philadelphia had a harder time than other northern seaports given its location on an inland riverbank with vessels unable to proceed past the mouth of the river. Nearly every year between 1720 and 1773 we have records of the Delaware freezing over and becoming impassable for one to four months. The consistent charting of the progress of shipping traffic and the structural integrity of the city’s wharves in most weather reports during the winter months in Boston, Newport, New York, and Philadelphia speaks to the place of the wharves as an essential space in daily urban life.

In a span of eleven days over February and March, 1717, a remarkable blizzard that came to be known as the ‘Great Snow of 1717’, consumed the northern colonies of America. Boston saw over three feet, or over a metre of snowfall and would receive “no vessels” whatsoever until 12 March, according to John Winthrop. Cotton Mather referred to it in grand terms, dubbing it “as mighty a snow as perhaps has been known in memory of man.” Accompanying this, high winds brought utter destruction to Atlantic coast shipping. Accounts of ships lost at sea or cast upon rocky shores abounded. Seemingly no vessel could make it in or out of any port, starving the beleaguered town of necessary flows of wholesale goods.

The hard winter of 1740-41 similarly affected all northern seaports with inactivity and economic stagnation. From mid-November until mid-March ports were closed and cities left without the comfort and security of Atlantic supply routes. Ice cover spread across Boston

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Harbour from the wharves all the way out to Castle William. In New York, the naval vessel HMS Gosport, ordered to be stationed permanently at New York, was forced to seek shelter in Turtle Bay from November through to April, and had to send longboats to row out to the edge of the ice cover and haul goods across the iced harbour to supply its crew with enough food to eat and wood to burn for the winter. Soon enough, the New York Weekly Journal noted that a “great want of Wood” swept the town, and left the poor starving and cold. The harsh winter meant that lumber, food, and other essential winter supplies would not be forthcoming via maritime routes. Celebrations abounded when two ships eventually broke through the ice in March, and cleared the way for shipping and supplies to the city. A weather report from Philadelphia told that “our river has been fast some time” (the pace of the river signifying that ice floes would hurdle down the river at speed, making it unnavigable) and that “tis all ice towards the sea as far as the eye can reach.” In such circumstances, without access to the arteries of imperial commerce, via the waterfront, residents of port-cities gradually began to suffer tangible adversity and wished desperately for regular commerce to return.

A blizzard immobilised both New York and Philadelphia on January 22, 1751. In Philadelphia “a violent S. E. storm which damaged wharves and vessels”. On the same evening in New York, the New York Gazette reported that a south-easterly winter storm had “done considerable Damage to several Vessels and Craft being at our Wharfs,” and expressed fears that, in addition, had it not occurred a few hours before high tide, “most of the Wharves would have been quite overflow’d.” Unlike the gradual pressure of ice cover blockages

34 NMM ADM/L/G/43, HMS Gosport, Lt.’s Logbook.
36 Lepore, New York Burning, 40.
38 Hazard, 2:23–24.
39 New York Gazette, 28 January 1751.
waterfront transition, blizzards could do substantial wreckage to the wharves and cause great distress to an ailing population holed up in winter quarters.

While nearly every winter froze up local harbours to some extent, the several months in the winter of 1766-67 took a particular toll on the northern ports. In early February, one newspaper reported that in Boston the winter had “entirely froze up our harbour so that many vessels which were loaded and ready for sailing are detained thereby; and people travelled to and from the castle on the ice.”\(^{40}\) The frustrating reality that vessels stocked and ready to ship out from the waterfront and return with supplies, but were rendered immobile by the weather, appeared a most frightful commercial situation to Bostonians. At the same time, in Philadelphia, the Schuylkill River became a worrisome hazard for the city, with flood waters overflowing the wharves and riverbanks until “the ice carried away all the boats, broke the ropes tore the wharf, and did other considerable damage.”\(^{41}\) Flooding combined with ice floes, in this case, serving to cripple the Schuylkill riverfront’s anchorage, economic utility, and infrastructure. While such incidents were hardly preventable, the dispossession and deprivation caused by winter storms underscored the necessity of wholesaling and maritime supply lines to the city.

**Hurricanes and Sea Storms**

Hurricanes and sea storms, by their very nature, strike at the beach and wharfside areas first and foremost—and with the brunt of their destructive power. Reports of such storms, consistently contain references to the damage done to the town’s shipping, waterfront warehouses, seaward fortifications and docklands infrastructure.\(^{42}\) While the notion that these

\(^{40}\) *South-Carolina Gazette*, 9 February 1767.

\(^{41}\) *Hazard*, *Hazard’s Register*, 2:25.

\(^{42}\) TNA/PRO CO 137/14/176, *Weekly Jamaica Courant*, 12 September 1722; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 5 September 1743; *Boston Post-Boy*, 24 October 1743; *South-Carolina Gazette*, 19 September 1752.
events provoked reference to the wharves is not surprising, the distress conveyed that waterfront destruction would lead to commercial stagnation, says much about the attitude of citizens towards their dockside environment. Hurricanes had an extreme capacity to completely destroy the waterfront. The importance of this built environment becomes most patently observable when in instances where it was utterly laid to waste. Stunningly little information was circulated about these chaotic and lethal events across the Atlantic, but to locals, the peril and uncertainty of the hurricane season was a grim reality.

Our first example comes from the tropical port of Kingston, well known for the regularity and potency of its sea storms. On 28 August 1722, a hurricane (sixteen feet in size) hit southern Jamaica. The effect was devastating. The storm tore through every structure on the Kingston waterfront, with water consuming not just the wharves, and the waterside promenade but an entire block inland, up to Harbour Street. The hurricane reduced trade to a trickle and motivated goods hoarding and black-market trade. Barrels of sugar, each worth a fortune in the European market, lay broken and empty in the sand. Sailors, who had died trying to protect their ships from the extreme winds, washed up on shore for days afterwards. To add to this, the hurricane left stagnant pools of water along the beach which spawned diseases that would infect the area with a lethal contagion for months to come. The storm also destroyed military infrastructure. Fort Charles, located at the mouth of Kingston Harbour at Port Royal suffered greatly. The east end of the fort collapsed into the sea, its cannons rolling off the palisade to the bottom of the harbour. Forty-six of the fifty vessels in the harbour smashed upon the shore. Kingstonians lauded the survival of the four remaining ships as a godly miracle, providing the seaborne linkages that would prove the town’s salvation in the coming days.43

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Bestowing a religious significance to the disaster, Governor Lawes informed the Council of Trade “wee were left destitute of any other covering than the Heavens.” In writing to the Council, Lawes limited his appeal for aid to issues of military significance, requesting a restocking of arms from London, funds for repairing damage to fortifications, and noting for the record losses of ships and troops. The religious rhetoric indicates the gravity of the situation at a town level as witnessed by Lawes, but the confined nature of the request conveys a tacit knowledge of the limited concerns of London’s imperial bureaucracy and the burden of the colonial town to rebuild. As the disaster unfolded, all kinds of unsettling economic and environmental issues emerged simultaneously: commercial destabilisation, labour shortages and military insecurity all proliferated in the wake of the hurricane. When the storm subsided, men desperately salvaged what they could of the publicly-owned wooden wharves, hauled lumber onto the beach, and began the reconstruction process immediately. The key area which concerned Kingstonians in the course of these events is the waterfront—a treasured commercial nexus, the key to the fate of the city. With the town’s darkest fears coalescing at the destroyed beachfront—goods scarcity, labour deficiency, epidemic disease, and military weakness—incidents such as this made clear the value imbued in the docks by the local populace, given its perceived fundamental role to the facilitation of trade, shipping, security, public health, and, by extension, civic livelihood in general.

In Charleston, the local newspaper account of a late August sea storm in 1743 prompted mention exclusively of ships and docks, in the Gazette:

Last Tuesday night [26 August 1743] we had a violent Storm, the Wind at N.E. which obliged the Vessels in the Harbour to make the best of their Way up Ashley River; several were drove on shore but got off again, except the Good Intent Brigt. of Boston,

44 Governor Sir Nicholas Lawes to the Council of Trade and Plantations, in CSPC, 1722-1723, no. 295.
45 Marx, Shipwrecks in the Americas, 383.
Christopher Thornton Master, and the *Lewis* of Plymouth, Capt. John Francis, the former of which is ashore on James Island and the other on White Point near Broughton’s Battery; Mr. Harden’s (Pilot) Boat was drove against a Ship’s Anchor and sunk, but has been since weigh’d, and some damage has been done to the Wharfffs.

We expect to hear of other Damage done by this Storm as well in the Country as on the Coast. ⁴⁶

This is the newspaper account in full, itemising only two objects deemed to be of public material interest in relation to hurricane’s destruction—the town’s shipping and its wharves. Luckily, in this case, with sufficient warning, ships could use river systems as refuges. But this selective concern, points to the civic significance of the waterfront.

Such storms were not geographically confined to tropical regions either. Just over a month later, Boston suffered through a crippling hurricane in October 1743. The *Boston Post-Boy* related that “The wind being excessive high vast damage was done to the wharves and shipping, some vessels that got loose were drove ashore higher up than was ever known before, and several small vessels were cast upon the wharves and boats floated into the streets.” ⁴⁷ Not for the first or last time, the status of the shipping and the wharves of the town is the key, and sometimes only, point of reference in the news summaries of hurricanes.

Again in 1744, a great hurricane tore through Kingston, similar in scope and power to that of 1722. The waterfront region is singled out once more as having sustained considerable loss. The survival of the warships, like 1722, was heralded as a miracle. But such upheaval generated not just commercial and transportation insecurity, but military insecurity. With Britain fighting in the Caribbean with both France and Spain in 1744, the terror of the town

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⁴⁶ *South-Carolina Gazette*, 5 September 1743.
became palpable. Both Governor Edward Trelawney and members of the Jamaica Assembly wrote back to London of the vulnerability they felt to enemy invasion.\textsuperscript{48}

Kingstonians suffered even greater misfortune at the beginning of the hurricane season of 1751, encountering another major storm. This time, Kingstonians were even less fortunate. All twenty-four merchant vessels, and a gigantic navy man-of-war, the HMS Fox, were scuttled in the storm. In 1722 and 1744, Kingston had been lucky, in that some ships had rode out the storm, which allowed the townspeople to seek urgent assistance from other towns and open up lines of communication and trade as soon as the storm subsided. Kingston’s harbour lay empty. On this occasion, with no providential remaining vessels, no chronicler saw a shed of light. One local stated “Nothing could resist the violence of it” and another that the sky turned “a very livid color, horrible to behold.”\textsuperscript{49}

But the worst of all these lethal storms struck Charleston’s shores on 19 September 1752. The \textit{South-Carolina Gazette} reported that the perilous winds and tides of the storm “reduced this Town to a very melancholy situation.” Charting the damage, the newspaper gave the following description of the morning’s carnage:

> Before 11 o'clock, all the vessels in the harbor were on shore, except the Hornet man of war, which rode it out by cutting away her main-mast … all the wharves and bridges were ruined, and every house, store, &c. upon them beaten down, and carried away (with all the goods, &c. therein) … great quantities of merchandize, &c. in the stores on Bay-street damaged, by their doors being burst open.

> Just as in the Great Fire of 1740 (and similar to the concern over Fort Charles in Kingston in 1722), much attention is paid to the state of Granville’s Bastion, and thus, the city’s

\textsuperscript{48} CO 137/57/229, Trelawney to Duke of Newcastle, 4 November 1744; CO 140/31, Petition to the King, 12 November 1744; Marx, \textit{Shipwrecks in the Americas}, 383; Matthew Mulcahy, \textit{Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean}, 1624–1783 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 102..

\textsuperscript{49} Mulcahy, \textit{Hurricanes and Society}, 1; Marx, \textit{Shipwrecks in the Americas}, 384.
defensive capabilities against seaborne invasion at the waterfront. The bastion “was much shaken” according to the *Gazette*, with “the upper part of the wall beat in, the platform with the guns upon it floated partly over the wall. The upper part of the curtain line, a solid wall at least four feet thick, was beat in upon the bay.” While briefly paying homage to the chaos and death caused in residential houses the news coverage turns back to shipping and commercial losses, stating: “nothing was now to be seen but ruins of houses, canows, wrecks of pettiaaugas and boats, masts, yards, incredible quantities of all sorts of timber, barrels, staves, shingles, household and other goods, floating and driving, with great violence, thro’ the streets, and round about the town.”\(^{50}\) Governor James Glen reported to London the amount of ships lost in the storm but limited his requests for aid from London to reparations for the city’s fortifications, his commissioned reports to the Board of Trade covered “the situation of Fort Johnson”, “Craven’s Bastion” and “the state and condition of Broughton’s Battery.”\(^{51}\) Again, in the local reporting of the aftermath of these catastrophic events, the ruin of waterside merchandise and infrastructure, and with it the town’s commerce and security, takes a central position, becoming principally evident in these most dire of circumstances.

**Conclusion**

Fires, winter storms, and hurricanes all had the capacity to damage, kill, destroy, and generally invoke fear. With the Empire limiting itself to military provisions, the mitigation of these circumstances—efforts at prevention, survival, and reconstruction—predominantly fell to the local level. Reliably, local accounts regularly warrant reference to the loss or harm done to the wharves, goods, ships, military security, and the progress of freighting and transport. With all these reports of fire, hurricanes, and snowstorms collated together, we can gather a distinct

\(^{50}\) *South-Carolina Gazette*, 19 September 1752.

impression of how the geographic position of the waterfront held value and consequence to the townspeople of port-cities. The process of negotiating with the colonial environment reinforced a civic sense of attachment to this space as well as inculcating a zealous instinct to preserve it.
CHAPTER 3

Disease and Quarantine

The arrival of disease-carrying ships at the waterfront also presented a struggle for local governance, necessitating the development of systems of quarantine control, which attempted to regulate contact with the docks and screen ships at offshore facilities prior to their entry into port. Starting in 1647, Massachusetts and New York began to establish laws of quarantine in response to a disease outbreak in Barbados. The Massachusetts order stated: “all our own or othr vessels comeg from any pts of ye West Indies to Boston harbor shall stop and come to an anchor before they come at ye Castle, undr ye poenalty of £100.” Philadelphia, in 1700, following a devastating outbreak in its fledging township enacted a similar law.

In these early laws, various fundamental issues emerged. While stated legal obligation to submit to quarantine if they found sickness aboard, this was not backed by enforcement mechanisms. Merchants and ships’ captains proved to be unwilling to cooperate. For merchants, time was money. The process of stopping, inspecting and possibly isolating and condemning a vessel delayed or prevented goods and labour from landing at the docks, risking lost profits and investment capital for merchants. For ships’ captains, the incentive to stop at quarantine checkpoints was practically nil. If a captain submitted to quarantine inspection, and disease was found, the entire crew would be isolated on a barren island for weeks or months together with contagious persons—this could quite conceivably be a death sentence. While quarantine had been established, captains undermined these security regulations and sailed

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3 Stange, *Vital Negotiations*, 197.
straight for the waterfront, encouraged by merchants, who feared heavy personal revenue losses in the quarantine process.⁵

The Empire came to see quarantine measures as a burden on revenue and discouraged such laws. The Privy Council went so far as to state in relation to an early attempt by Massachusetts to institute quarantine regulations that “the uncontrolled manner in which the Colony was exercising its powers was becoming increasingly detrimental to the economic welfare of England and the Empire.”⁶ Disease came suddenly and unpredictably. The inconsistency of the threat also meant a lack of urgency amongst imperial authorities, such as the Board of Trade and Plantations, for any provision of military or financial support to local governing bodies. London paid little attention to issues of disease prevention in the colonies. The Privy Council assumed responsibility for maritime quarantine in British ports but left the colonies to fend to themselves.⁷ Local forces felt a sense of civic pride and both legal and symbolic ownership over the wharves and docks in their respective cities, and they acted consistently to protect this vulnerable space. Unassisted by the empire, city authorities attempted to identify and repulse vessels carrying contagions from making contact with the waterfront.⁸ This pitted the local councils of America’s port-cities against the forces of imperial trade in a struggle over waterfront regulation.

In this chapter, I will show how processes of quarantine and sanitation developed in British American ports and how the docks, as a place of entry point for ships from across the globe, increasingly became a space to be defended and protected from the dangers of infectious disease.

⁸ Blake, Public Health in Boston, 80–81.
Developing Quarantine Inspection Practice

As port-cities began to develop in British America, so too did the need to protect these growing urban populations from disease. Cities took it upon themselves to create their own inspection regimes and place hospitals, or pesthouses, to function as quarantine isolation stations on nearby islands on the fringes of their respective harbours. Wishing to mitigate against diseases brought on slave ships from West Africa, Charleston made Sullivan’s Island British America’s first formal offshore quarantine station in 1707. New England followed this example, Newport began to utilise Coaster’s Harbour Island in Narragansett Bay in 1716 and Boston begun quarantine on Spectacle Island a year later. Finally, after a catastrophic smallpox outbreak in 1738, New York established Bedlow’s Island as its key quarantine facility and Philadelphia in 1743 nominated Province Island in the Delaware River for this purpose. Kingston is not known to have had a functioning quarantine pesthouse, although the military hospital built on the Port Royal peninsula (1740) sometimes served this purpose.\(^9\) Local authorities either bought or rented these islands from private owners for the purpose of protecting the waterfront from shipborne disease.\(^{10}\)

A prominent early example of this in action occurred when a naval vessel, the HMS Seahorse arrived in Boston Harbour from Barbados on 22 April 1721. The Seahorse’s captain, Thomas Durrell, knew that his vessel carried a contagion: two of his men aboard his vessel had come down sick with smallpox. Reports of the smallpox outbreak in Barbados had already reached Boston—all ships in the harbour were to be inspected at the recently erected quarantine station on one of Boston’s harbour islands—Spectacle Island. As he awaited the allocation of

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wharf space on the Long Wharf, Durrell devised a plan to evade inspection. On April 20th he
docked at Castle Island, the island military fortress two miles from the shoreline, under the
pretext of seeking repairs, but his intention was to claim “important military business” on the
island, likely to avoid inspection until he could make for the wharf.\textsuperscript{11} And two days later, the
\textit{Seahorse} docked at Long Wharf, the infected men disembarked and a city-wide plague
followed. When city inspectors discovered the \textit{Seahorse} to be the locus of the outbreak, the
Boston Selectmen ordered the vessel towed to Bird Island and had the Long Wharf washed and
sanitised.\textsuperscript{12} But it was too late. Bostonian authorities had failed to repel a potent biological
threat from the waterfront. One of the most devastating disease outbreaks in urban British
America, costing 844 lives, this 1721 smallpox epidemic instilled the legal and regulatory
imperative of protecting the waterfront from hazardous maritime arrivals, a message which
would soon spread to other port-cities.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1728, a different but no less potent contagion, yellow fever, sent a wave of panic
through Philadelphia and led to a prototypical example of successful on-water quarantine
isolation in the American colonies. Unlike Boston, Philadelphia had yet to nominate an island
for service as a quarantine outpost. It did, however, in 1720, establish the first provision for an
official port physician, obliging vessels under suspicion to anchor in the harbour before
approaching the docks and await a medical examination.\textsuperscript{14} As an inland port, Philadelphia’s
river pilots were well situated to defend (or fail to defend) the city against disease. Therefore,
at the same time, the colony issued several laws to specify that these pilots give warnings of

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any signs of disease before a vessel made it into the docks. Hearing of a spate of fever outbreaks, Pennsylvania Governor, Patrick Gordon, enacted the colony’s first quarantine screening laws. Two ships from Bristol, the *Dorothy* and the *Pharaoh* were among the first to be subject to the full process of Gordon’s scheme.

Pilots on the Delaware directed John Bedford, the master of the *Dorothy* to visit Doctors Thomas Graeme and Lloyd Zachary before approaching the shore. Graeme and Zachary’s assessment reached the Governor and the Pennsylvania Provincial Council, deeming the *Pharaoh* to be free of disease, but that the *Dorothy* “had been seized with a malignant Fever, of which some were dead, a good many recovered, & a few still ailing.” The Council enacted that the *Dorothy* must not venture: “nearer than one Mile to any of the Towns or Ports of this Province” and there would be no chance of offloading “any Goods, passengers or Sailors, from on board her at Philadelphia.” Captain Bedford took the actions demanded of him by the Provincial Council. He jettisoned corpses overboard, confined those infected below decks and separated the uninfected, likely by having them sleep on-deck. For a week, the ship and its passengers were left to lie anchored in the River, in an impromptu seaborne isolation.

When Graeme and Zachary returned for a second inspection, they gave the uninfected passengers the all-clear and commenced the final process of sanitation. The Council required that the ship be “smoaked with Tobacco and washed with Vinegar, & that the Bales of woolen goods on board remain some time exposed to the Air on Deck before landing,” decreeing that the *Dorothy* must “ly out in the stream of the river & not come near any Wharf till she is sufficiently cleansed.” The idea of protecting the Delaware River wharves featured prominently here, expressing the great value of this space. Local councils saw the necessity to

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shielding its wharf space from disease infiltration. On this occasion, quarantine found success. Yellow fever did not hit Philadelphia’s wharves in 1728, largely due to these efforts.

Fear of infection by smallpox beset Boston once again in 1736-37. Hearing of a smallpox outbreak in Philadelphia, on 11 November 1736, Massachusetts Governor Belcher instituted an exceptionally concrete edict, ordering that “every Vessell coming from that port, may be Stopt at the Castle, until the Master and Men have been Examined.” This action coincided with the construction of Boston’s new Rainsford Island isolation facility that year and a general strengthening in policy. In particular, the Selectmen listed a series of questions regarding quarantine to be asked of all incoming vessels and instituted a rigorous administrative scheme for the admission of vessels into the city, producing a large upswing in recorded instances of ships undergoing quarantine. The Ann and the Abigail were the first to be quarantined in January 1737. When Dr. William Davis came aboard, to inspect the vessels, he found them both to be free of disease, but recommended as a precaution that the vessels be halted from coming in to the docks. After five days in exile, on the fringe of the harbour, the vessels and their passengers were inspected again, cleared, and allowed to come ashore. Three months later, the Sarah, arrived in Nantusket from London via Cork, the master freely admitted that several of his crew members to smallpox on the course of the Atlantic trip. Between April and June 1737, the ships Humbird, Friend Ship, Beginning, Yarmouth and Betty were all stopped, but promptly allowed to go to shore. Not only were quarantine inspection becoming more regular, but the case of the Sarah illustrates a growth in compliance to these laws.

After all this, the disease which would eventually penetrate Boston in September 1737 was not smallpox, but measles, brought by the ship Sagamore, arriving with immigrants from Ireland. It had docked without inspection. Knowledge of the circulation of measles in Ireland

\[18 \text{Records of the Boston Selectmen, 1716-36, 11.}\]
had yet to reach the colonies. But townspeople became suspicious as the tell-tale spots indicative of the measles began to show on some of the Sagamore’s Irish newcomers. The Boston Selectmen had the ship’s commander, Captain Gibbs, hauled in to the Council chambers for questioning by physicians. These physicians determined that given the risk of measles to the town, Gibbs must take his ship from the docks, all the way to Rainsford Island, enter quarantine and sufficiently “Air” and “Cleanse” themselves and the ship. Despite the compliance of Gibbs, the waterfront quarantine zone had been penetrated and, by that point, the infection had spread too far about the town.²⁰ The largest port-city in the Americas at this time and possibly still haunted by the memory of 1721, the cautious Boston Selectmen pioneered and soon systematised the process of quarantine to protect its wharves from harm.

The London Frigate docked in Charleston in April 1738. The frigate arrived carrying slaves from the Guinea Coast. Soon after its arrival, smallpox raged through the town, over 300 people lay dead. The ship’s captain quickly put the slaves ashore to the Charleston slave market and sold them off to buyers some from the town, some from across the Carolina countryside, while unsold slaves were shepherded back aboard the ship. Thus dispersed, reports began to filter back that some of the slaves had begun to show signs of smallpox. The Governor’s Council determined the London Frigate to be the culprit. Promptly, authorities launched frantic efforts at damage limitation, issuing orders to masters to return their new slaves. Finally, the South Carolina legislature ordered the frigate away from the wharves out to the quarantine station on Sullivan’s Island.²¹ This governmental act of putting the slaves back aboard and ordering the frigate away would obviously serve only to lessen the already catastrophic damage as epidemic ravaged the town, but it does illustrate the necessary step in administrative action

²⁰ Boston Record Commissioners, 70–71.
towards disease prevention focused on the waterfront—the act of pinpointing and exiling the offending vessel away from the wharves becoming increasingly established practice.

This devastating 1738 outbreak acted as a call to action for many Atlantic towns. It was evidenced the fragility and dangers faced by seaborne disease and inspired changes to local laws across the continent before the year was out. New York succumbed to the same infection, promptly directing all harbour pilots to lie in wait on the coast of Sandy Hook, at the mouth of the harbour, and force all arriving ships to first dock there and clear medical examinations by Dr. Roeliff Kiersted before embarking into the East River wharves, or up the Hudson. Meanwhile, the New York Assembly quickly commenced the construction of its first pesthouse on Bedlow’s Island.\(^\text{22}\) Philadelphia passed a similar new law ordering that no Delaware River pilot could bring a vessel within a mile of the city, without stopping to bring aboard the port physician for inspection.\(^\text{23}\) Newport took particularly drastic punitive steps in quarantine regulation in this year, including of establishing the death penalty for any “evil minded” masters of vessels who would come up to the docks knowingly carrying sickness aboard.\(^\text{24}\) The outbreaks of 1738 signalled a turning point in the history of protecting public health in American ports. Concern about waterfront safety and disease prevention accelerated alongside the growth of British American towns. The docks represented the key site for this alarmism.

**Developing Waterfront Public Health and Sanitation**

Quarantine was not the only element of disease control at the waterside, however. The docks were not only the flashpoint for the conveyance of lethal contagions by ship, but could be unhealthy sites of pollution, contamination, and infestation that may well incubate disease. As quarantine systems developed as a method of disease prevention across the Atlantic world,

\(^{24}\) James, *Colonial Metamorphoses*, 167–68.
another health issue emerged at the docks, the production of disease at the waterside itself, leading to pushes for greater attention to sanitation and public health.25

Kingston and its harbour hospital at Port Royal, lacked enforced quarantine regulation, possibly stemming from a perception that the town’s unhealthy tropical environment would breed disease regardless of legal on-water precautions. Aboard Commodore Charles Brown’s fleet of twelve vessels and 2,685 men in 1738, disease (likely similarly affected by the yellow fever epidemic that had hit New York and Charleston at this time) killed 180 men and led 228 to desert.26 Admiral Edward Vernon, preparing to campaign against the Spanish, docked his fleet of 64 vessels and 19,805 men in Kingston Harbour. Of these, 3,499 perished by the end of the year fleeing lethal influxes of both malaria and yellow fever—likely nurtured locally in the nearby swamps—to add to Vernon’s woes, another 760 men deserted to safety away from the waterside. The placement of the Port Royal hospital next to this unsanitary mosquito-infested area, unintentionally created a deadly and infectious environment, which killed more men than it could save.27 The high rates of desertion tied into Admiralty fears about manning the navy and maintaining an adequate fighting force to oppose the encroaching French and Spanish.

After a second outbreak of yellow fever in 1744, a naval surgeon stationed in Jamaica during this crisis, Dr. John Hume, began to suspect the location of the hospital near the swampland, and would make recommendations to the Admiralty. He advised that incoming naval vessels be “cleared by other ships” before entry into port, instead obtaining clearance after their crews had disembarked. Further, he extended, sailors not acclimatised to the tropical Caribbean environment for a year or more should not be allowed shore leave or to make “encampments on shore” in West Indian ports. As a final prevention measure, he also

25 Duffy, The Sanitarians, 28–30
26 Crewe, Yellow Jack and the Worm, 67–71.
27 Crewe, 73–74; Rogers, The Press Gang, 83; Brunsman, The Evil Necessity, 133.
recommended that direct shipping of vessels from British ports to the Caribbean should be
timed for arrival after the “rains” and “great heats” of the wet season in Jamaica “have
ceased”. Kingston’s waterfront environment was profoundly unhealthy, causing men to flee
and stagnating its wholesale trade and military utility, producing a growing cause for concern
over the coming years.

A distinction can be drawn between this Jamaican experience of copious mortality rates,
and the attitude to sanitation in Philadelphia experienced in reaction to the same 1741 yellow
fever epidemic that had struck Kingston. Though the exact source of the outbreak was not
located, the blame was variously levelled at two culprits. First, the fever may have been brought
by sea. The Council accused various Caribbean vessels, and later, a convict transport arriving
at Hamilton’s Wharf from Dublin. Throughout 1741, the Provincial Council found that the
appointed port physician, Thomas Graeme, had neglected his inspection duties on the River.
The Council quickly stripped Graeme of his position as fever spread throughout the town. The
other locus of anxiety was the fermenting piles and puddles of contaminated refuse on the
Delaware River waterfront itself. In particular, the Council suspected Dock Creek, a notorious
dumping ground for waste and excrement from the nearby tannery, acting effectively as a sewer
and forming a stagnant swamp. Sanitation came then to be coupled with quarantine as a means
of protecting Philadelphia’s waterfront from contamination.

28 John Hume, “An Account of the True and Bilious Fevers or Yellow Fever; and of the Remitting and
Intermitting Fevers of the West Indies; by the Late John Hume, M.D. and Commissioner for the Sick and Hurt of
the Royal Navy,” in Letters and Essays on the Small-Pox and Inoculation, the Measles, the Dry Belly-Ache, the
Yellow, and Remitting, and Intermitting Fevers of the West Indies: To Which are Added, Thoughts on the
Hydrocephalus Internus, and Observations on Hydatides in the Heads of Cattle by Different Practitioners, ed.
Donald Munro (Edinburgh: Charles Eliot and J. Murray, 1778), 245–8; Coriann Convertito, “The Health of British
29 Daniel Johnson, “Hot-Heads, Gentlemen and the Liberties of Tradesmen,” Cultural and Social History
1884), 209–10; Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania: From the Organization to the Termination of
75.
Seeing another yellow fever outbreak in 1747, but unsure of the cause, local physicians in Philadelphia grew even more concerned than they had been in 1741 with improving public health around the waterfront. While the origin of the outbreak is unknown, some in the Council pointed to sanitation issues on the waterfront, as the Council Secretary noted: “There is reason to think by this & other Fevers always shewing themselves first in some or other of the houses about the Dock that this quantity of Filth & Mudd breeds or at least very much contributes to the Malignancy of Distempers.”30 But others attributed responsibility to the enforcement of quarantine regulations, prior to waterfront entry. The Council had a ship’s captain recently arrived from Barbados jailed for subverting quarantine and his ship and passengers isolated.31 Regardless of the catalyst—whether shipborne or generated at the waterside itself—with these disasters, the regulation of maintenance of the docks, as well as transportation, became an increasing governmental priority.

Quarantine in the Seven Years’ War

As the Anglo-French imperial tensions ramped up in 1754 the epidemiological risk posed by influxes of soldiers and immigrants into Philadelphia produced intense trepidation throughout the city. In particular, German immigration sparked anxiety over a disease referred to only as “Palatine Fever”—most probably a form of typhus which prevalent among new German immigrants.32 In the last half of September 1754 alone, seven ships of Germans, overcrowded with around one hundred passengers each, arrived from the ports of Rotterdam and Hamburg. The Provincial Council dispatched Dr. Thomas Bond to inspect German houses and German ships in the harbour. Bond quickly discovered that a disproportionate number of the sick had been aboard the Adventure, arrived from Hamburg on September 25. “Soon after her coming

30 Hazard, Pennsylvania Acts Commencing 1644, 769.
into Port,” Bond reported back, “the Captain, Mate, Merchant, with the rest of the Mariners and most of the Palatines, were taken ill of Fevers.” This vessel had been inspected by Bond upon arrival, but he confessed his suspicions that “the sick” may have been “wickedly concealed from us”.\(^3\) Suspecting people smuggling, such a perceived deception aggravated anti-immigration sentiment and fused it with the local need for quarantine regulation as civic protection. The Council ordered the port physician to inspect all incoming ships from the Palatine region. In December 1754, The Pennsylvania Assembly proposed a bill applying specific measures to the prevention of German ships landing in the province—seeing the overcrowding of immigrants in these vessels as generating a fertile disease environment. But when the Assemblymen delivered this act to the new governor, Robert Hunter Morris, he deemed that “several parts of the Bill militated against the Principles of Humanity,” and refused to sign the bill into law.\(^3\) As the demands of war amplified insecurities and urban population growth expanded the calculable damage of disease vectors in the 1750s, fears of foreign actors entering the waterfront spurred renewed stringency in the quarantine system.

These concerns over German immigration, however, were negligible in comparison with the fear stimulated by throngs of African slave imports arriving into port-cities across the Atlantic coast annually and the dangers this could bring to public health. In 1744, Charleston passed a law requiring all slaves to visit quarantine for ten days. By 1756, Charleston had to employ eight port physicians to accelerate the speed of ship clearances, and thus, prevent the congestion of traffic in the Ashley River waterfront area. We can see this particularly in the correspondence of Charleston’s wealthiest merchant and prominent slave trader, Henry


Laurens, who recounts numerous incidents of his own slave shipments from Africa being stopped by quarantine at Charleston harbor, by force of the 1744 law.\textsuperscript{35}

Displaying a merchants’ attention to calculable risk, Laurens fluctuated between compliance and non-compliance with this law. On some occasions, Laurens appeared to tolerate the public good of quarantine process and willingly take the hits to revenue without protest. In 1756, the \textit{Relief} from Angola was sent to Sullivan’s Island, Laurens took up the responsibility of personally sending a doctor and nurse to inspect the passengers. He lauded the success of Charleston’s quarantine process at this time, proudly stating “Our Pest House where the Slaves are to be placed during their Quarantine is in good order.”\textsuperscript{36} When word reached Laurens that one of his brigantines, carrying 118 slaves, had fallen to infection in May 1758, the Governor’s Council demanded Laurens send orders to prevent any landing at the wharves. Laurens did so, he took charge of their isolation and saw through the entire process including providing the exiles with food.\textsuperscript{37} In stark contrast, at other times Laurens showed himself perfectly willing to prioritise return on investment over public health. In 1755, he had ordered an associate to reroute his vessels via Jamaica for sale as the enforcement quarantine regulations were very lax in comparison to Charleston, and after which he could divert the remainder of his cargo straight to Charleston without issue.\textsuperscript{38} Laurens vented his deep displeasure again in the winter of 1763, when authorities ordered his sloop \textit{Molly} “away from the Wharf because the Small Pox appeared upon one of her Seamen.” He apologised to his business partner Thomas Martin in Antigua who was expecting the \textit{Molly}’s arrival, lamenting that were it not for the quarantine laws, the vessel would have already been several days at sea.\textsuperscript{39} This targeted slave-specific quarantine system effectively kept the traditionally disease-

\textsuperscript{38} Laurens, \textit{Papers of Henry Laurens}, 2:43.
ridden port of Charleston relatively free of smallpox, but it also exacerbated the anxieties of slave traders over littoral shipping movements.\textsuperscript{40}

During wartime, mass influxes of sailors, particularly in northern seaports, too, became cause for concern. When the Boston Selectmen caught word of a smallpox outbreak in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in October 1757, they began stopping all vessels that had entered at Halifax. With the war ramping up, these stoppages continued until August 1758. From Halifax alone, forty vessels are recorded to have been stopped and quarantined at Rainsford Island in this timeframe, sometimes just for one night, sometimes up to several weeks.\textsuperscript{41} General Jeffery Amherst and Cadwallader Colden, in the military hub of New York, in 1758 and 1762 adopted forceful and thorough quarantine laws (much like those in force in Boston) insisting on the stoppage of \textit{all} vessels entering into port, subject to an official interrogation by the harbour pilots, and a medical examination for all those deemed to be from infected areas or giving suspect answers.\textsuperscript{42} Such rigid, comprehensive, and long-term quarantine efforts demonstrate the lengths which local authorities would go to in order to shield their wharves from infection, particularly in times of war.

Philadelphia was less successful. In August 1762, on the Sugar House Wharf in South Philadelphia, yellow fever struck once again. Dr. John Redman, looking back on the outbreak thirty years later, attributed this outbreak to “a sick sailor from on board a vessel from the Havannah (where it then raged) was brought privately after night.”\textsuperscript{43} This certainly is a logical

\textsuperscript{40} Stange, \textit{Vital Negotiations}, 198.
\textsuperscript{41} Blake, \textit{Public Health in Boston}, 87; Boston Record Commissioners, \textit{A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston: Containing the Records of Boston Selectmen 1754 to 1763} (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1887), 63–95.
\textsuperscript{43} John Redman, \textit{A An Account of the Yellow Fever as It Prevailed in Philadelphia in the Autumn of 1762: A Paper Presented to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia at its Stated Meeting, September 7, 1793} (Philadelphia: College of Physicians, 1865), 12–13; Gilda M. Anroman, “Infectious Disease in Philadelphia,
conclusion: smallpox indeed ravaged Havana in this time and Philadelphia certainly saw a flood of sailors returning to from campaign in Cuba in these months. As in the 1754 typhus outbreak, the Provincial Council attributed the epidemic to people smuggling, a seemingly common trope, linking smuggling practices which abounded at this time with the dread of waterfront infection.⁴⁴ The notion of the culprit as a sailor arriving clandestinely in the night, at a wharf, without permission, cannot be definitively verified as more than rumour. The popularity of this rumour, however, and both the method and the site of this sailor’s supposed arrival indicates to us that the port-city residents regarded the wharves as vulnerable targets of disease infiltration, regarding incoming ships and sailors with suspicion.

**Quarantine and the Boston Tea Party**

To conclude our study of disease, we look to Boston in November of 1773, to the teaship, *Beaver*. The teaship *Beaver* is well-known for its part in the Boston Tea Party. Relatively untouched upon in the scholarship, however, is its short stint on Rainsford Island, just prior to its seizure by an angry Bostonian mob.⁴⁵ Hezekiah Coffin, master of the Brigantine *Beaver*, arrived in Boston Harbour from London, having experience a smallpox outbreak on the Atlantic voyage, was ordered by the Selectmen to stay at Rainsford Island before coming ashore. The famous tea was to be aired, the Selectmen told the owner and resident of Rainsford Island, Samuel Hartley, to “take the whole of the Tea from between Decks upon the Deck of the Briggandine. If the Weather be fair let it lay on the Deck the whole Day to be aired” but with fury against the Tea Act brewing outrage on the waterfront, with citizens identifying the much anticipated incoming teaship, the Selectmen suggested extra precautions. They further

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⁴⁴ Records of the Boston Selectmen, 1754-63, 221.
ordered “at Night see it put between Decks again, and you with the two Men you are ordered to take down with you are to remain on board during the time the Tea is on Deck and on no account to absent yourselves, and by no means suffer one chest of Tea to be landed or taken away by any one.” Benjamin Edes, publisher of the *Boston Gazette*, joked in his newspaper that the *Beaver* was laden “not only with the plague (TEA) aboard on board, but also with the Small-Pox,” conflating the threat of disease infiltration with the imposition of the British state—in the form of the taxed tea. After two weeks of watching from the shoreline, the *Beaver* came into the docks on 13 December, only to have its “cleansed” cargo of tea thrown overboard three days later.46 Quarantine laws came to be the regular routine practice, no matter the cargo and, in contrast to our initial case, that of the *Seahorse*, over five decades earlier, quarantine had solidified in terms of enforcement and became tough to subvert. Insecurities about the safety of waterfront exchanges thus provoked increasingly stringent local governmental protections.

**Conclusion**

Quarantine regulations developed throughout the eighteenth century until they became an accepted fact-of-life in Britain’s port-cities. Local and imperial forces disagreed. London generally stepped away, feeling that there was little it could do to prevent immediate and sudden threats and largely absolving themselves of responsibility. The Empire seemingly felt it financially prudent to act in service of quarantine only in the European context. The real conflict arose in enforcement and the interests of merchants and passengers. Sometimes ship captains and merchants complied, at other times they did not, but generally an aura of distrust and deceit permeated the quarantine inspection process. For an infected ship, reaching the waterfront and offloading cargo constituted an essential goal, just as local government worked

to regulate and repel seaborne disease threats. The to-and-fro around the harbour of stopping, inspecting, and exiling vessel was a fraught and tricky process. What emerges prominently here, is the importance of the waterfront and its economic exchanges to various local forces, whether it was defending it, or simply trying to make it into the docks without delay.
PART III

Contesting the Built Environment

The issues of labour and capital control were subject to far stricter imperial concern and legislation, in contrast to the hands-off attitude of the Empire regarding epidemiological and ecological catastrophes narrated to this point. The British fiscal-military state prioritised military build-up and excise, thus, the issues of naval impressment and customs practice at the waterfront were manageable points of concentrated imperial interest. While protecting public health and infrastructure were relegated as colonial issues, in regards to safeguarding its revenue and its naval power the Empire sought closer oversight and involvement. The necessity of imperial economic and military extractions at the waterfront, clashed with local assertions of rights and ownership over this space—compounded by the reconstruction and protection efforts made in the face of disasters. Therefore, contests over law and order arose in this zone.
CHAPTER 4

Impressment and Desertion

The seaborne British Empire could not be secured if it could not secure its military labour force for its Navy, but maritime labour was a competitive business. The procedure of naval impressment effectively amounted to an act of abduction, or kidnapping, by the British military. Groups of sailors, known as press-gangs, would row ashore, accost, assault, and detain men, off the wharves or from the decks of ships in the harbour, and force them onto awaiting naval ships, which would quickly depart for the open ocean, where there was little avenue for escape.\(^1\) Legally speaking, in 1708, Parliament passed “An Act for the Encouragement of Trade to America”, which expressly forbid impressment in the American colonies without the permission of a royal governor. However, conflicting interpretations soon led to confusion over authority and legality. The Navy adhered to a ruling by an attorney-general that the law had expired after the Peace of Utrecht in 1714; while the Board of Trade in London continued to instruct governors to enforce the law. A compromise appeared in the question of whether the governor of a colony routinely issued warrants for impressment to naval captains remained; but this hardly cleared up the issue.\(^2\)

The practice of issuing press warrants from the Royal Governor had its limits, however.\(^3\) Often, deferring to the Navy, governors looked the other way. With governors well

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aware of the centrality of labour market dynamics to the town economy, warrants could be difficult to procure. Seizing upon legal ambiguities, naval officers habitually pressed without royal warrants, leading to dramatic jurisdictional conflicts.⁴

Sailors in British naval vessels, well aware of the dangers faced onboard—death, illness, starvation, low pay, harsh disciplinary laws—would likely exploit any available chance to escape the naval service into the safety of the port-city as soon as they hit the docks. Understanding this, naval commanders did their best to limit and control the movements of their crews on shore. Impressment ruined urban labour and took labourers from merchant shipping, leaving ships, rendered unseaworthy by lack of manpower and unable to leave the docks, stifling trade flows. Merchants, seeking profits and needing seamen, sought to remedy this. While the Royal Navy impressed sailors and labourers into their ships, local merchants enticed men to desert from naval service and into the better conditions and pay of merchant shipping. In general, townspeople in American port-cities did not take too kindly to this impressment process. The seafaring nature of these colonial American port-towns, reliant on the waterfront exchange, meant that taking men off the docks threatened the city economy as a whole, distressing necessary wharfside industries—such as maritime trade, privateering, fishing, shipbuilding, and stevedoring. Even if impressment itself did not take a substantial number of men, fear of impressment drove countless men inland, away from the waterfront, upon word of an ongoing press.⁵ The conduct of impressment, as Christopher Magra has shown, depressed wages and economic opportunity for the ordinary seaman or maritime workers, further testing the patience of the city’s labouring classes.⁶ Aware of this, townspeople

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assisted desertion and shielded deserters from press-gangs, generating further tension. Here, we have a system of competitive labour acquisition ripe for various levels of physical and jurisdictional conflict at the waterfront.

**Impressment in the War of Austrian Succession**

The act of impressment was an innately violent activity. The jurisdictional ambiguity, economic importance of maritime labour, and local attachments to waterfront control, instilled greater meaning to this violence. Much like in the case of quarantine, war amplified local concerns. Although impressment conflicts had existed for a long time, the onset of hostilities against Spain and France which would merge into the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) escalated the struggle over maritime labour in the British America to new heights. In this time, jurisdictional contests between the townspeople, the governor and the navy were worked through variously—via legal means in some cases and violent means in others. But as policy in London changed, violent methods soon came to predominate.

A murderous incident in 1740 in Charleston aptly represents the conflict generated by impressment. Captain George Townshend of the HMS *Tartar* sent a press gang to board a merchant ship, *Caesar*, which lay anchored in the bustling “floating market” of Charleston Harbour. Townshend’s subordinate officer, Samuel Bathurst, led the gang on its expedition aboard the *Caesar*, but when Bathurst and his armed gang arrived, the ship appeared undermanned; only the merchant ship’s master and its pilot remained on deck. It appeared that the crew had had the wherewithal to lock themselves in the hold to avoid the press. Enraged, Bathurst reportedly enquired after the crew and when the master, Francis Williams, answered

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evasively, the naval officer swung at him with his sword, wounding him. The pilot and the master, bleeding profusely, escaped and fled to the wharves to report the incident to the town. Meanwhile, Bathurst and his men attempted to force their way into the locked hold, banging and kicking at the door. Someone fired a shot through the door, followed by a panicked volley of shots from both sides, leaving one of the Caesar’s men dead. Days later, when the press gang had returned to the Tartar, Governor William Bull sent a longboat out to the ship with a subpoena for Bathurst, but Captain Townshend defended his subordinate, threatening that the longboat sent by Bull would be “repelled by force” and “sunk” if it “did not stand off.”

Nevertheless, eventually Townshend shied away from more violence, and Bathurst would be arrested and indicted for murder. The Navy’s sense of their own authority and ownership over harbourside labour was such that Townshend and Bathurst openly defied a royally-appointed Governor to affirm their perceived right to hunt and capture men at waterside anchorages.

This notion came to the fore again in Boston in the summer of 1741. On the evening of 8 June, a press gang packed onto the rowboats of the HMS Astrea, anchored in Boston Harbour and headed for the Long Wharf. Seeing the rowboats making their way towards shore, a large mob of local mariners and dockworkers reportedly “ran down upon the Wharfe with clubs and Sticks in their hand and forbid their Landing.” The press gang had to return to the Astrea empty-handed. Five days later, Bostonians spied a rowboat headed from the Astrea to shore again. This time however, the rowboat had been stolen. These were escapees—deserters—who had been abducted by the Astrea’s captain, James Scott, on earlier press gang raids, and were fleeing their captor. When Captain Scott awoke to the daring escape, he ordered a broadside cannonade to sink the longboat, but failed to hit his target. As the men clambered onto land,
Bostonians assisted the deserters in their escape, hiding them from Scott’s sight. After much petitioning from Scott, Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher risked the ire of Bostonians by officially granting the *Astrea* an impressment warrant. The *Astrea* made up its complement and left sight of the harbour.\(^{10}\) In this tug-of-war dynamic of raids, repulses and retreats, the battlelines in the fight for the acquisition of maritime labour were clearly drawn—at the shoreline.

Populated with an unsteady number of white men, often lost to rum, climate and disease, impressment fomented similarly disruptive conflicts over the labour market security on Kingston’s waterfront, stoking fears of being overrun by a substantial black population. The case of the merchant ship, *Scipio*, in June 1745 speaks to the ruinous stagnation inflicted upon Kingston’s valuable waterfront exchange by heavy impressment. Immediately upon reaching Kingston, a press gang snatched twelve of its crew, much to the displeasure of its captain Peter McTaggart. The next week, a gang boarded the ship again in the middle of the night, and despite McTaggart’s pleas, violently whisked away one more man from the ship. The week after that, the press gang seized two more of the *Scipio*’s men, who had been whiling away time on the wharves waiting for McTaggart to garner enough recruits for an onward journey. With the loss of fifteen men, the *Scipio* was disabled; left stranded in the harbour, clogging Kingston’s shipping exchanges for three months. McTaggart eventually scraped together a skeleton crew, enough to undertake a journey home. But just as they reached the mouth of Kingston Harbour and began to prepare for the open seas, press boats surrounded the *Scipio* and took eleven hard-won sailors. The dejected McTaggart brought the *Scipio* back into the harbour to weigh anchor and await new recruits once again. The naval abduction of white labourers particularly unnerved white Kingstonians insecure about the maintenance of the racialised slave labour

system upon which the city relied. Unhappy, the merchants of Kingston wrote to Parliament complaining of an inability to export their goods and the economic stagnation represented by the immobility of shipping.\(^{11}\) The Royal Navy had taken impressment too far in the labour-scarce environment of Kingston and the Empire backed down, recognising impressment’s limited viability and profitability in a fragile Caribbean environment and the importance of these merchants’ activities to imperial revenue as a whole.

The 1746 Act and its Aftermath

In June 1746, partially in reaction to the Scipio incident, the Whig government in Westminster, affected by the revenue losses incurred by such waterfront stoppages in the shipping and trade of sugar, consented to a complete exemption of its West Indian colonies from impressment. The residents of North American port-cities, realising that this placed an extra burden on their labour supply, quickly made their feelings known and sought to protect their waterfront economy with even greater force and determination.\(^{12}\)

One of most infamous impressment affairs in colonial America occurred in November 1747 when Captain Charles Knowles of the HMS Lark conducted a press with a warrant from Belcher’s successor as governor, William Shirley. On the morning of 16 November, Knowles and his press gang reportedly “swept the wharfs” taking “as many seamen as could be found on board any of the ships.” Violent backlash again surfaced as the crowd forcefully retaliated against the state’s intrusion into city labour markets: taking officers of the Lark as hostages, laying siege to the chambers of the Provincial Council and surrounding Governor Shirley’s mansion. When Shirley enlisted a squad of well-armed soldiers to defend his house; they returned to the waterfront, seized a customs boat from the water, parading it along the wharves

\(^{11}\) Brunsman, The Evil Necessity, 118.

and burning it in the town. The mob then formally militarised, broke into units and patrolled the wharves in shifts ensuring that no Royal Navy personnel in the *Lark*, out in the harbour, could venture to shore to rescue their brethren and those captured, and could not make it back to their ship.\(^13\) The action of boat-burning we will see recurring across this survey of waterfront conflict, simultaneously a kind of symbol of defiance and a reclamation of a space; while the spontaneous militarisation of the mob speaks to a deep-seated wish to dominate and protect this important liminal space.

In Charleston, in January 1748, two Royal Navy schooners attempted to acquire men for naval service. As the press gang reached the wharf, a mob of sailors from ships adjacent to the wharf met them—wounding two soldiers. The mob came together and boarded a docked ship and the South Carolina Council reported that “having loaded their arms went in a piratical manner and took possession of another ship near them and going into close quarters swore they would be the death of whoever came on board.” Eventually, the mob surrendered, but the two soldiers died of their wounds.\(^14\) This audacious play for supremacy sought possession and domination over ships in docks in the same way the Knowles riot mob sought to assert their ownership of the wharves. Using the ships as a stockade, creating a defensible position, literally on the docks, and threatening those who would interfere with this secured zone. This was to be the last of conflicts that plagued urban waterfront during the War of Austrian Succession. But during the Seven Years’ War, the scale of conflict and the ambition of the press gang would intensify markedly both in scale and brutality.


\(^14\) Craig Marin, “Coercion, Cooperation, and Conflict along the Charleston Waterfront, 1739-1785: Navigating the Social Waters of an Atlantic Port City, 1739-1785” (PhD Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2008), 78–79; *South Carolina Council Journal*, January 5, 1748.
In May 1757, New York was awash with wartime hysteria. Lord Loudon’s naval fleet of over one hundred vessels lay anchored in New York Harbour with orders from Prime Minister William Pitt to launch an assault on the French-Canadian port of Louisbourg—but it had not moved in months. Mass desertions of sailors into the city and onto privateering vessels had meant frustrating manpower shortages and delays in the voyage. The city’s privateering industry had proved a force to be reckoned with, privateers fighting tooth-and-nail in the streets and on the docks to shield deserters from naval press gangs. Still, the number of sailors in Loudoun’s fleet amounted to a contingent of 3,500; well below what the Admiralty expected. To rectify this, Loudon delegated to Rear-Admiral Sir Charles Hardy, who had, surrendering his position as the military governor of New York, taken up a position in Loudoun’s fleet, commanding the frigate Nightingale.\(^{15}\)

At 2 a.m. on 20 May, leaving only skeleton crews aboard the ships, Hardy ordered three battalions, over 3,000 of these men, divided into squads, to row silently across the waters of harbour and enter into the city. The result was a night of chilling violence. As Hardy’s men snuck quietly onto the waterfront, the squads of sailors and moved to tactical waypoints across the city; they enclosed and encircled the lower half of Manhattan and cutting off all means of escape. They are told to have “patrolled the streets” and systematically “searched the taverns, and other houses, where sailors usually resorted” on the East River quays—this quite clearly included brothels.\(^{16}\) They accosted all men of fighting age, who at that time of night were likely in a drunken and vulnerable state, of which there were many, and skirted the wharves, raiding houses and brothels known for their seafaring clientele. By sunrise, around 6 a.m., eight hundred men had been and detained over the course of the night, around one quarter of the


city’s adult male population. A clear assertion of the Navy’s right to violently appropriate labour across the waterfront, this raid represents an apex in the scope of impressment in British America.

In the same setting, on 22 August 1760, the HMS Winchester looked to quench its thirst for men by co-opting the crew of a privateer, the Sampson, which had just arrived in the East River after voyaging against French shipping. Captain John Hale estimated that some of the deserters that he had lost had entered into the service of the Sampson and ordered a warning shot fired over the privateer’s bow to intimidate the vessel into coming to. Sufficiently spooked, the Sampson’s captain, Osborn Greatrakes, complied and ordered the men to peacefully receive the Winchester’s boarding party, led by a Lieutenant Frodsham. Unwilling to go without a fight, however, the hardened privateers aboard the Sampson vowed retribution. They launched a quick-fire mutiny. The men locked their captain in his cabin, loaded their muskets and fired a volley down at the King’s men aboard the Winchester, killing one, injuring three, and forcing others overboard. Outraged by this carnage, Hale ordered the Winchester’s crew to man its cannons and fire a broadside at the Sampson, which hit and killed four of the merchant ship’s crew. With both sides mourning losses, the Winchester and the Sampson separately headed back to the Manhattan shoreline.

The Sampson reached dock first and its men dispersed. But when the Winchester arrived and Captain Hale told his side of the story to Governor Cadwallader Colden, the Governor immediately issued a warrant for the arrest of the entire crew of the Sampson and mobilised the city militia. Hearing that the New York City sheriff, constables and the militiamen had assembled to search for them, the Sampson’s crew again determined to make a stand. They returned to vessel, quickly moved it fifty yards out from the shoreline (just out of musket range)

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and armed their twenty-two cannons, aiming directly at the public quays and slips of the East River. The standoff lasted through the night, while the sheriff sent word to the Winchester to assist him. With a royal warship approaching by sea and officers awaiting them on land, the crew of the Sampson piled onto longboats and rowed for the outskirts of the town, where they found safe landing-places and successfully disappeared.\(^{18}\) In the martial atmosphere of wartime New York, the waterfront became a site where legal, military, and economic tensions the came to breaking point. In this case, such tension reached the point of a dockside armed standoff.

The Act of 1746 provided a key point of contention which escalated tensions at the waterfront, the onset of the Seven Years War even more so. North American port-cities now took on the brunt of the obligation for supplying manpower across the continent. This onus of responsibility was promptly recognised from Charleston to Boston, escalating the stakes and the animosity of impressment confrontations at the waterfront.

**Impressment and the Imperial Crisis**

New points of contention emerged as resentments grew in the wake of the Seven Years’ War, in what is now termed the “Imperial Crisis”. Impressment remained as a key point of conflict at the waterfront throughout this time, intermingling with a broader set of tensions within the Empire, particularly merging with customs enforcement and taxation issues, to represent defiance not just of the Navy’s press tactics, but the imposition of imperial authority more generally.\(^{19}\)

In 1764, Lieutenant Thomas Hill of the HMS St. John was one of the first naval officers to face the backlash of this accelerating local agitation. Lieutenant Hill had earlier provoked

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\(^{19}\) Magra, *Poseidon’s Curse*, 5–6.
the ire of Newporters by seizing the sloop \textit{Basto} from Monte Christo, suspected of holding smuggled cargo.\textsuperscript{20} A week later, Hill sent a press gang ashore with the explicit purpose of seeking Thomas Moss, described as “a deserter, who had left the vessel some days before” and was said to be “on the wharf” at that time. As the press gang surrounded Moss, a “larger mob” of Newporters reportedly surrounded the press gang, and freed Moss. With Moss shepherded to safety, the mob turned their attention to the commanding officer of the gang, Lieutenant Doyle, whom they promptly took as a hostage. As the rest of the press gang made for their longboat and back to the \textit{St. John} they were met with a barrage of stones, said to have “fell as thick as hail … into the boat”, causing grave wounds to each men. Threats and exclamations travelled across the water. From the wharves, the mob displayed their hostage to the ships, and threatened to kill Doyle. They also threatened to “haul the \textit{St. John} onto shore and burn her.”

In a stunning show of bravado, a contingent of seafarers split from mob, found an armed merchant sloop in the docks—of equivalent weaponry and size to the \textit{St. John}—and set it to sail, heading straight for the naval vessel. Hill ordered a retreat to anchor under the stern of a nearby and far larger naval vessel the twenty-gun ship, \textit{Squirrel}. Seeing this, the bloodthirsty, and now seaborne, group of insurgents diverted, manning two more boats, and making for Goat Island. At the head of this landing party came two city councillors, who proceeded to leverage their authority and induce the gunner of Fort Wolcott to fire on \textit{St. John}. William Smith, commander of the \textit{Squirrel}, tried to exert his authority on the situation by sending his Lieutenant to Goat Island, to compel the gunners to cease fire, only for the Lieutenant to be knocked out cold by the mob. The gunners fired eight shots at the \textit{St. John} before they could be compelled to stop.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} William P. Sheffield, \textit{Historical Address of the City of Newport Delivered July 4, 1876} (Newport: John P. Sanborn and Steam Job Printers, 1876), 30–31.
The dramatic scene of army gunners, compelled by civic leaders, firing upon a naval ship demonstrates the confused and disputed nature of waterfront authority. Overall, at Newport, the anti-impressment mob, with the assistance of city councillors, caused a violent frenzy in the harbour. The speed in which a quarrel over the labour procurement descended into exchanges of threats, projectiles, hostages, and cannon-fire across the waterfront speaks to the infectious and violent fervour felt in cases of perceived naval offences against the waterfront market. Likely, the escalation of the conflict had something to do with Hill’s previous actions in prosecuting customs laws, which already had the seaport town (deeply involved with the smuggling economy) on edge.22

Staying in Newport, the next year, Hill and the St. John had vacated and the HMS Maidstone took on the duties of patrolling Narragansett Bay. By June 1765, the Maidstone had been in Newport for six months, variously conducting small presses and holding the town’s waterfront trade and labour on edge, in fear of kidnapping, and, thus, stifling the trade of the town. While an expectant Newport crowd anticipated the arrival of the stamps any day now, on 11 June, Captain Antrobus of the Maidstone seized the entire crew of a slaving vessel inbound from Africa, leaving the vessel floating listlessly by the docks. Samuel Ward, the governor of Rhode Island, observed that this press had been undertaken without his permission, in violation of the 1708 Parliamentary Act. Ward ordered the release of Antrobus’ impressed crew from Newport. Captain Antrobus refused to comply and stayed put in the harbour. Quickly hearing of this, a mob of 500 men assembled by the wharves, seeking retribution. When Captain Antrobus sent a subordinate, Lieutenant Jenkins, aboard one of the Maidstone’s longboats to conduct another press, the crowd quickly overpowered, accosted, and abused Jenkins and his men and proceeded to seize the boat out of the water, dragged it into the town

22 Barrow, Trade and Empire, 191.
and burned it in sight of the royal ship. In Newport, we find jurisdictional confrontations as well as physical ones. When faced with press-gang operations, locals responded with rituals to reassert their possession of the waterfront. Within imperial institutions as well, the Maidstone riot demonstrates how military and civil authorities also arrived at various states of discord and disputation over this issue of impressment.

In May of 1768 Captain John Corner of the HMS Romney launched a press, endeavouring to seize several maritime labourers from a docked merchant vessel just arrived in Boston from Glasgow. When the men managed to free themselves, jump overboard, and race across Boston’s docks into the town, the press gang went in pursuit, shouting “stop deserters”. But hearing this commotion a mob of local Bostonians rapidly materialised on the waterfront and stopped Corner’s men in their tracks. Several days later, a press gang from the Romney tried to make up for this failed attempt to secure labour by kidnapping a young apprentice straight off the docks. The mob again materialised, and demanded the release of the boy, eventually Corner relented. He tried one last time to secure an extra man, this time he did so in the safety of the harbour, away from the reach of the town’s populace, he ordered his crew to take a man from an outbound vessel, set out for Halifax, Nova Scotia. The vessel could not risk the North Atlantic voyage without a full crew and was forced to return to the wharves and relay the news of lost trade and a hopelessly kidnapped man, to the increasingly livid inhabitants of Boston. Similar to the St. John incident, this altercation would soon be tied to resentment regarding customs enforcement (as will be related in the next chapter) forcing

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23 Newport Mercury, 10 June 1765; RICR 6:447; Magra, Poseidon’s Curse, 299–301; Sheffield, Historical Address, 33; Elaine F. Crane, A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 112–13; Maier, “Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America,” 9.


25 Magra, Poseidon’s Curse, 259–60; Carp, Rebels Rising, 53–54.
Captain Corner, the Governor and customs agents to jointly conspire and flee the city to recover the waterfront authority from the townspeople.

**Conclusion**

Impressment conflicts proliferated in American port-cities between 1740 and 1770. Competition over flows of maritime labour made the colonial waterfront a thoroughly contested space. The defensive and possessive stance towards the waterfront taken by townspeople as stakeholders in this space, which we have charted in relation to disasters and disease previously, also applies in the case of the waterfront labour market. The shielding of deserters, mob resistance to the press gang, and ritualised boat-burning, all acted to repossess the wharves as a local dominion. The Navy’s critical process of capturing and transporting unwilling men from the waterfront along with its unclear jurisdictional authority to do so, therefore, consistently resulted in wharfside confrontations and violence. Observing this, we can see how, given resolute local interests in this space, the colonial docks were a place where imperial military goals could be thwarted.
CHAPTER 5

Smuggling and Customs Enforcement

As the eighteenth century progressed, smuggling on the American continent became an increasing menace to the conduct of imperial trade. In the colonial American port, smuggling operations forged an unofficial economy essential to the city’s function at the periphery of Empire. The British Empire, in attempting to curb the proliferation of undeclared goods entering port-cities and secure revenue, passed what became known as the Navigation Acts—prominently customs excises and vessel seizures—generated power struggles at the colonial American waterfront.¹ It is notable that it is the American port-cities which felt the yoke of these mercantilist policies most heavily as they acted as transitional hubs for economic activity, and, by extension, necessary centres for imperial economic regulation.² Unable to monitor the movement commodities on the high seas or offloaded goods in the town, customs authorities relied upon the maintenance of an ordered administrative checkpoint at the waterfront. In these contests, various levels of governance would enter into alliance and into conflict: the customs service, the town’s dockside population, the military, wealthy city merchants, royal governors, and Parliamentary authorities in Westminster.³

Early Smuggling Conflicts

Like impressment, smuggling has a long history in British America. Even prior to the Seven Years’ War and the Imperial Crisis that followed, waterfront mobs took extreme actions to protect smuggling interests and smuggling ships from imposition by the customs offices. In the early part of the eighteenth century, the duties of the customs service had to be achieved with

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² Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 27.
a severe personnel deficiency to enforce them. At this time, there were only roughly two-to-five customs officials in each major port-city and no permanent police or security apparatus, which made enforcing the Navigations Acts on a reluctant public a frightful, near insurmountable, task.\(^4\)

One of earliest incidents of dockside violence over customs enforcement comes in 1724, when the ship *Fame* arrived in Philadelphia from Rotterdam. Upon docking at the Delaware River wharves, the *Fame*’s captain, William Lea, declared to the customs office that it carried only a passenger load of German immigrants as cargo—no saleable goods. An audacious high-risk gamble, as it would turn out. Collector John Moore sent a customs officer (or tidewaiter) by the name of Hugh Hughes to authenticate these claims. Once down in the hold Hughes ventured to lift up a pile of lumber, uncovering a stunning array of produce. Along with fine European brandies, wines, and cheeses, the *Fame* housed highly valued trade goods from the Asian market, likely from the bottoms of Dutch East India Company vessels. These included a thousand gallons of Indian arrack liquor and over two hundred pounds of tea.

Immediately upon hearing Hughes report back, in order to secure the cargo, Moore placed four tidewaiters to guard the ship overnight. In the dead of the night, sixty or seventy people, in disguise, rushed the vessel, “in a tumultuous & violent Manner”. Two of the tidewaiters “being terrified by the menaces of these rioters … leapt over board,” while the other two were detained, gagged, and tied up aboard the ship. The well-organised raiders then cut the *Fame* loose from its moorings and towed it out of the harbour and up the coast, where it could be stowed away from the eyes of the customs office. In the aftermath, Moore attempted to gather witnesses, but smuggling interests had already locked down communication across the wharves. Those who raided the *Fame* and cut its ties, or knew of the ship’s intent to trade

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illegally, had been sworn or intimidated into silence. This incident shows the importance of the wharves as an important, yet contested, space for commercial landings. The Fame’s cargo appears a veritable treasure trove. Seeing this, locals proved willing to use violence and terrorisation as methods to secure these goods. This sabotage of customs procedure at the waterfront, not only allowed for the procurement of the merchandise, but suggested the town’s ability to act similarly in the future, staking a claim over dockside freighting and commerce through intimidation.

On a wintry day in Newport on February 1738, John Peagrum, the Surveyor General of the Rhode Island’s customs house, became suspicious of a French vessel by the name of Younger Brother, reported to be carrying French rum and molasses. That night, Peagrum assembled a gang of officials to formally seize and disable the ship, including: the Marshal of the Admiralty Court Charles Paxton, the Sheriff of Newport County, and several militiamen whom the Sheriff had raised. Peagrum entered the vessel holding a lantern, seemingly finding nobody aboard, he sent a man up the shrouds to fasten the sails to the mast, and another to cut the ships cables and disable it. All of a sudden, a shadowy figure knocked the lantern out of Peagrum’s hand, shattering it, and leaving nothing but moonlight to illuminate the confrontation to come. Suddenly, three other men clambered up the ship’s ropes to stop the man with the sails, “kick’d, and drove him down upon Deck again” pushing him from the great height onto the decks. When a man by the name of Roach, the freighter of the Younger Brother appeared, and began a torrent of abuse, Paxton retaliated by striking Roach twice with the butt end of a bull whip. Roach then struck Paxton back with a cane and drew his sword. After a stand-off, Roach “upon being perswaded to quit the Vessel” is told to have “continued his Threats upon the Wharff with his Sword in his Hand.” Paxton ordered the sheriff to arrest

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Roach, but, likely fearing retribution upon himself, refused to do so. By this time, many waterside dwellers had awoken to the noise and joined Roach on the wharf, they soon began hurling snowballs at Paxton, in the face of the sheriff’s refusal to respond, the officials abandoned the ship to its crew and to the mob. As Paxton headed back “up the Wharff to his Lodging”, however, Roach pursued him with a broadsword, chasing him away from the waterside and into the town. This on-ship scuffle soon became a chaotic mix of weak or unwilling legal enforcement and mob action on the docks, an early incident in what would become a long battle over wharfside authority between the customs service and the forces behind the smuggling economy.

The ‘French Trade’ in Wartime New York
During the Seven Years’ War, a deluge of illegal trade with the French Caribbean produced a worrying reality for governmental authorities and the termination of this activity at the waterfront became a deeply contentious issue. One port-city thrived in this trade, New York City developed into a hive of smuggling conflicts during this wartime period. The city had prominently been shaped around a potent commercial ethic, and its location (suitably distant from the major centres of military conflict in Canada and the Caribbean) enabled New York to focus, more than most port-cities at this time, on private gain in spite of the public war effort. New York merchants became especially adept at ferreting goods between the East River wharves and outbound merchant ships which never came into the wharves, but anchored out in the harbour, out of sight from the shoreline, to avoid customs duties.

The case of the *Catherine* illuminates this common process of clandestine exfiltration. It is reported that at around midnight on 18 May 1756, at Bockee’s Wharf near Whitehall Slip

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6 *Boston Gazette*, 6 February 1738.
7 Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 176.
on the East River, laborers set to work loading a small workboat full of barrels of flour and bread. By the cover of darkness, they had to work both swiftly and silently. A French merchant in Saint Eustatius had made the order and the 30-ton sloop *Catherine* was determined to reap the rewards of this illegal, but profitable, southward trip. Two merchants were involved in the smuggling plot, Samuel Stilwell, owner of the *Catherine*, and John Burroughs, owner of the smaller, but quicker, sloop used to sneak the cargo off the wharves. The *Catherine*, mastered by Obadiah Hunt, hid in the shadows behind Staten Island. At 4 a.m., Stilwell, Burroughs and their skeleton crew of labourers, quietly slipped away from the East River and rounded Staten Island to meet the *Catherine*. The two sloops anchored alongside each and the crews transferred of 180 barrels of flour and 50 more filled with bread from one ship to the other. This was no easy feat, however, for hours the small crew hauled the cargo from Burroughs’ vessel to Stilwell’s, while the ships rocked on the water. Burroughs, Stilwell and Hunt set off on the *Catherine* for Saint Eustatius. New York’s customs officials had no idea that they had been fooled in the night, until four days later when an anonymous informant went to the authorities to give the game away. Simply by taking in secret cargo from the docks, mariners and merchants defied the imperial waterfront regime; the escape from the docks in the dead of night, to make relayed cargo transferrals represented a common, mostly invisible method of waterfront subversion.

The saga of customs informant George Spencer in New York City tells us much about the violence and the spectacle that could be involved in the battles over waterside smuggling. As the imposing 140-ton brig *Charming Polly* rested on the East River wharves, Spencer ventured to notify authorities of the forged documents which the *Charming Polly* was using to cover its trade with the French via Saint-Domingue. Its owners, William Kelly, Waddell

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9 Truxes, *Defying Empire*, 52.
10 Truxes, 66.
Cunningham and Samuel Stilwell (also the owner of the *Catherine*) and the city of New York, struck back violently.\textsuperscript{11} The conspirators gathered at the Merchant’s Coffee House, the mechanisms for Spencer’s disgrace and downfall were put into place. But, Spencer, who coincidentally, was at the same Coffee House playing backgammon, was invited into the room. Once behind closed doors, merchant George Harison took charge of the intimidation ritual. He threatened to “throw him into the dock” if he came anywhere near the wharves where their ships were moored.\textsuperscript{12} This threat can tell us something about the nature of mercantile protectiveness over their ships and their wharves. The desire to bar this informant from the wharves specifically elucidates this deep-seated anxiety and conflict surrounding this space. Mercantile economic security relied upon a culture of silence around the docks and New York’s merchants, in this case, demonstrated a willingness to resort to bullying tactics and, perhaps violence, in order to enforce this regime. Harison’s statement that, if he approached the waterfront, he would hurl Spencer “into the dock” further adds to this idea of a sense of mercantile possession over the waterfront and also how merchant ownership of wharves and ships reinforced this sense of ownership.

The next morning, November 2, the public execution of a sailor, Henry Cobb, for murder, on the New York Common gave the merchants a mob (mostly consisting of other sailor) which they hoped to be able to incite and exploit for their own purposes. A local court clerk signed a warrant for Spencer’s arrest, on false charges, and Deputy Sheriff Phillip Branson acquiesced in making the arrest. Branson then violently dragged Spencer in the back of a horse-driven cart and rode him around the streets of New York, where he was pelted with “dirt and filth” and abused. The procession did not pick up real pace until it hit the Fly Market and neared the waterside. Immediately, sailors abandoned their posts to join in the torture of

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\textsuperscript{11} New York Gazette, 9 April 1759; New York Mercury, April 30, 1759; New York Gazette, 10 December 1759; Peter Andreas, Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America (Oxford University Press, 2014), 27; Truxes, Defying Empire, 77.
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\textsuperscript{12} TNA PRO CO5/60/7, Letter from George Spencer to Jeffrey Amherst; Truxes, Defying Empire, 13.
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this smuggling informant. Moving south down the waterfront and approaching Whitehall Slip, next to Fort George, Lieutenant-Governor Thomas DeLancey met the growing mob with a contingent of soldiers. With this, the rioters quickly and seamlessly evaporated into the waterfront taverns around the Battery. The city’s waterfront community knew how to use this space; they knew its hiding spots and secrets. The fact that the mob suddenly dissipated into the waterfront, shows how the labouring denizens of New York’s rowdy waterside taverns, with their knowledge of this space, felt it was theirs to walk.

Notably, this riot did not start at the waterfront, but it certainly became a waterfront riot. With the mob expanding rapidly at the waterfront, mariners and dockworkers came out in force to voice their revulsion and hatred for those who would jeopardise their ritual subversion of customs authorities at the docks. The journey of the procession, down from Fly Market to Whitehall Slip, is unlikely to have been an accident, breaking the culture of silence on smuggling was a subversion of the waterfront domination and the demonstration aimed to reclaim the space. We see in this case, how the forces of capital (merchants) and the forces of labour (dockside workers) each by their treatment of Spencer asserted their ownership of the docks and violently demonstrated their interest in maintaining their title over this space.

**The Arrival of the Stamps**

The Stamp Act taxation riots in British North American port-cities are a well-known facet of colonial American history. Their location, in and around the waterfront, is manifestly important, given that the stamps would arrive from Britain by sea, and the docks being the processing point for customs checks and legal passage in and out of the colony. Location, however, is important here, as the actions of the mob displays a sense of connection to, and a

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14 Truxes, *Defying Empire*, 16.

sense of violation of, the space of the docks. In the year following the enactment of the Stamp Act (22 March 1765), violent crowds—often egged on by the leadership of wharfingers, merchants and sailors—flocked in protest to the waterfront.\textsuperscript{16}

A revealing example, for our analysis, is that of Newport. For four days in late August 1765, riots and disorder reigned across Newport’s waterfront. London charged stamp agents Augustus Johnson, Thomas Moffat and Martin Howard with the stamp collection. Hearing this, a mob quickly assembled and turned on the customs officials and raided the houses of Moffat and Howard.\textsuperscript{17} The three soon fled to board the HMS Cygnet. Seeing the Royal Navy vessel as their only safety against the rages of the crowd, they were soon joined by chief customs agent John Robinson. The ship’s captain, Charles Leslie, prepared the ships’ cannons. Without Robinson’s approval, shipping could not be passed through the port. Robinson stayed put in the Cygnet, bringing the trade of Newport to an administrative stalemate which effectively acted as a blockade. Robinson, Johnson, Moffat, and their families lived in exile in the harbour, in the naval hospitality of Captain Leslie, about the Cygnet until late November.\textsuperscript{18} Philadelphia experienced a remarkably similar scenario. The stamps arriving, traversed down the Delaware, aboard the Royal Charlotte on 5 October, never made it to shore. Getting word of the Royal Charlotte approaching from Gloucester Point, Philadelphians assembled at the docks to intimidate the vessel from proceeding up the Delaware.\textsuperscript{19} These waterfront standoffs, leaving the stamps stranded aboard vessels in the water and unable to enter the docks, signified the

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\footnotetext[17]{Benjamin L. Carp, \textit{Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 41; William P. Sheffield, \textit{Historical Address of the City of Newport Delivered July 4, 1876} (Newport: John P. Sanborn and Steam Job Printers, 1876), 32.}


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importance of the waterfront as a nexus for Empire’s customs administration and a local determination to mark their authority.

Meanwhile, in Charleston, the chaos of the taxation riots brewed problems on the waterfront with sailors and fears of black rebellion. In defiance of the Stamp Act, donning blackface and wielding clubs and cutlasses, they raided the house of the influential Charleston merchant Henry Laurens, believing that the stamps were being held in his home. When they were eventually convinced that Laurens was not concealing the paper, they ridded themselves of their blackface disguise and disbanded across Charleston’s wharves.20 Much like in after the George Spencer affair in New York in 1757, the sudden dispersal and disappearance of the mob employs much the same tactics as guerrilla warfare—attack and disappear into the shadows—giving the impression that the waterfront was the mob’s territory—a space locals could, using intimate knowledge of the urban environment, strike at any time.

A different story unfolded in New York in October. Wary to avoid the tumults that took place in these other cities in the previous two months, when the HMS Edward arrived to offload its stamps, imperial officials had laid out a distinct path for the vessel. Two of New York’s stationed naval vessels acted as a protective convoy. The HMS Garland was sent to the narrows and the HMS Hawke was placed at Sandy Hook to shepherd the Edward through the harbour. The Edward specifically avoided the East River wharves and headed straight for the security of Fort George to dock and dump its stamps behind the fort’s protective walls.21 However, this did not deter New York’s rioters. The townspeople tore apart some of Fort George’s outer defences. Governor Cadwallader Colden, disturbed at this, manoeuvred to put the stamps

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aboard the HMS Coventry. With the East River wharves firmly in the domain of the waterfront community and the security of Fort George compromised, Captain Archibald Kennedy of the Coventry took control and placed the Coventry and the Garland at the mouth of the harbour to form an impromptu seaborne checkpoint for shipping clearance. Kennedy took a bolder, more hard-line approach to the stamp issue than Colden and the customs authorities were willing to take, given their fear of the mob outside the fort. Thus, numerous ships trying to make it outbound into the Atlantic met the Coventry and the Garland, only to be sent back to the wharves. With waterfront space rendered untenable for imperial authorities, this inefficient and time-consuming naval checkpoint, effectively, led to a stagnation of trade in and out of the city—as had occurred in Newport.

When a second stamp-laden brig, the Polly, arrived in New York in December, the mob whipped into action again. They found that residence of the Polly’s first mate, John Byvanck, threatened him with violence unless he gave over the keys to the hold of his vessel. When he complied, they searched the wharves for the target vessel, finding it anchored at Cruger’s Wharf, opening the hold and taking the packages of stamps. They then drew on a growing waterfront tradition, seized a longboat from the boathouse, piled the stamps inside, and set the alight on the docks, projecting ownership and intimidation in this space. Having learned of the outcomes of these previous stamp arrivals across the Atlantic seaboard, the Empire took every precaution to ensure that the waterfront transition went smoothly in New York by shepherding the stamps directly into the Fort. When despite this the governance of the waterfront became compromised, the Navy began to throw its weight around. A three-way

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rivalry emerged between civil government, naval authorities and the anti-Stamp Act populace around the harbour and the East River wharves, leading to a confused and contested governance of the movement of ships and of the stamps.

**Combatting the Waterfront Inspection Regime**

As battles over customs duties and taxation escalated in the era known as the Imperial Crisis, so too did the violence at the waterfront. Taking orders from London, the customs service intensified its efforts to inspect and seize smuggling vessels at the docks. Many of the clashes we have seen prior to the Stamp Act had been violent, but there were also contests of jurisdiction mediated by the courts and the legal system. In the wake of the arrival of the stamps, resentment amongst local urban populations rapidly intensified, who thirsted for greater waterfront control and to take the fight to the customs service. Extra-legal means became more popular, and locals resolved to defy the regulation of the waterfront transition with unprecedented levels of violence and assertiveness if need be.25

When a merchant schooner carrying rice attempted to leave the wharves of Charleston in February 1766 to make for Georgia—the only British American colony which had successfully implemented the Stamp Act—a mob stopped the vessel from leaving and forced it to offload its cargo onto the wharves, threatening that if the ship’s master did not comply, his boat would be burnt on the wharves.26 The threat made to the Georgia-bound vessel demonstrated the mob’s willingness and power to govern departure as well as arrival at the waterfront. The threat to burn the boat on the wharf played upon an increasingly common waterfront ritual of boat burning which had gained new communal meaning in British America since the 1740s.

A year later, in the same location, a battle at the docks occurred between the HMS *Sardoine* in May 1767, captained by James Hawker, and the merchant schooner the *Active*, recently arrived from Winyah Bay about sixty miles north of Charleston. Suspecting the vessel did not have proper clearance, Captain Hawker fired a shot across the *Active*’s bow. He brought the vessel too and ordered it into the town’s docks. Then Hawker sent a boat down to inspect the vessel. But, at the wharf, he was met with a mob throwing projectiles at the approaching rowboat. The officer Hawker had sent in the boat was injured and two men were forced to jump from the rowboat and swim back to the *Sardoine*. Determined not to be bested, Captain Hawker readied several rowboats and a larger contingent of men and headed to shore himself to seize the *Active*. The mob upped its arsenal, finding cutlasses, axes and firearms with which to combat Hawker and his raiding party, warning “if any of the Boats belonging to his Majesty’s ship … should put off with an Intent to go on Shore or to board the Schooner they wou’d fire at them.” Just as the rowboats reached shore, Captain Hawker came to the front of his boat and ostentatiously held a Union flag aloft and waved it at the dockside mob. A bloody skirmish looked about to take place, before the quick-thinking owner of the *Active* waved his customs papers at the Captain and the issue was resolved without violence. Despite the peaceful resolution, the physical act of waterfront workers throwing objects at a military inspection party speaks volumes about the format and function of this space. It demonstrates how smuggling inspection was perceived by locals as an infringement upon their zone of influence and control.

On the night of 7 April 1768, Boston merchant John Hancock docked his brig, the *Lydia*, at his privately-owned wharf—Hancock’s Wharf. Two customs officers (or tidesman) came aboard the *Lydia*, but Hancock made sure that the ship’s captain did not allow the officers

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to search below decks, possibly to conceal incriminating evidence.\textsuperscript{29} A mob, including many prominent merchant-smugglers, such as Daniel Malcom, met Hancock and the two tidesman on the wharf.\textsuperscript{30} Hancock stood his ground and used his significant business holdings as leverage; he cited his rights as a private citizen to deny access to his own ship on his own wharf, and told the officers that if they continue with their inspection, “he would immediately turn them out of his Employ.”\textsuperscript{31} The mob was delighted. They attempted to parade Hancock up and down his wharf. But Hancock modestly stopped them from doing so.\textsuperscript{32} Hancock’s use of leverage to ward off customs officers shows the extent of mercantile power and influence over the wharves, which were, after all, a deeply commercial space. The merchant-labour alliance which we see clearly here indicates a joining of forces as stakeholders in the waterfront exchange and local title it.

This feud between Hancock and the customs service soon merged with outrage over the HMS Romney’s press in May. Two months after the Lydia affair, on 10 June 1768, John Hancock had his ship docked at his own wharf once again, this time it was a different one of his vessels, the Liberty. The Liberty received its cargo of Madeira wine on Hancock’s Wharf. Customs officers Benjamin Hallowell and Joseph Harrison, however, rightly still wary of Hancock’s regular brazen attempts to fool the customs’ office, and suspicious that the Liberty’s cargo of wine fell mysteriously under capacity, determined not to let Hancock get away with his subterfuge again, they swiftly seized the vessel. Predictably, the waterfront mob caught word of this and made for Hancock’s Wharf in great numbers. Reportedly, the mob turned on Harrison and Hallowell and began to hurl stones and insult at both men. Governor Francis Bernard and Captain Corner of the Romney provided their only means of escape. Governor Bernard did not have enough troops to quell the mob, protect himself or the customs agents, he

\textsuperscript{29} Andreas, Smuggler Nation, 43.
\textsuperscript{30} Carp, Rebels Rising, 45.
\textsuperscript{31} Carp, 30.
\textsuperscript{32} Carp, 45.
saw only one safe haven—out into the harbour, to Castle Island. The imposing fifty-guns of the HMS Romney approached the scene at Hancock’s Wharf. Imperial forces abandoned the city. The Romney towed the Liberty away from the wharf and out into the harbour and welcomed aboard Bernard, customs commissioner Henry Hulton as well Hallowell, Harrison and their families to Castle Island. Unwilling to antagonise the Romney, the mob allowed this to take place, but as the naval vessel turned in retreat, the assembled mob responded. They hauled out from the waterside “a boat belonging to the custom-house,” which they “dragged in triumph through the streets of the town and burnt on the Common”.34

The opposing forces glaring at each other across the harbour, the imperial authorities and the military on Castle Island and the rebellious section of Bostonian society on the docks. Governor Bernard sent a letter to Admiral Hood in Halifax pleading for men to retake imperial control of the city.35 Inside the fort, Ann Hulton, sister of Henry Hulton, declared that the exiles (herself included) had been effectively, “prohibited [from] setting foot on Shore again”.36 The officials did not comfortably set foot on shore again until October when a fleet of fourteen Royal Navy ships appeared in the harbour and 1,200 redcoats marched down the Long Wharf in a ceremonial display of the restoration of order and imperial power.37 The push-and-pull of attack and retreat and of symbolic displays by both local and imperial forces here provides some of our most powerful evidence for the struggle for waterfront domination.

34 Hutchinson, History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, 1828, 3:191.
Coincidentally, when Harrison seized John Hancock’s *Liberty* in 1768, the Admiralty chose to convert the vessel into a Royal Navy ship and placed it under the command of Captain William Reid. Reid ironically took this former smuggling vessel—now the HMS *Liberty*—on a large anti-smuggling campaign conducting numerous seizures in the course of 1769. But when in July, he seized two Connecticut vessels, one brig and one sloop and brought them back to Newport for formal legal condemnation, the Newport mob leaped into action. At Newport, the captain of the brig, a man by the name of Packwood, ventured to the wharves to ask the customs officers to allow him to row out to his brig—anchored in the harbour—where some of his clothes from his seized vessel had been stored. Captain Reid stayed on shore but granted Packwood permission to board his ship.

Upon arrival, much to his dismay, Packwood discovered that some sailors were stripping down his sloop, in the middle of the harbour away from the touch of the Newport mob, before a prosecution had even been made. Adding to this, the naval seamen on-board the brig showed themselves hostile to his presence on their vessel. Enraged, Packwood asked, instead, for his sword, also stored in the cabin of the brig, in what must have been seen as a provocative demand, prompting torrents of abuse. As Packwood sought to head back to his longboat, and back to shore, one sailor unsuccessfully attempted to wrench the sword from his hands. Rushing onto the longboat and rowing back to the wharves, an exasperated Packwood began to take fire from the swivel cannons of his own ship. The cannonballs did not hit Packwood’s boat, but this had gotten attention of the town, a large crowd gathered at the waterside to watch the proceedings. Whether they intended the swivel-cannon shot to hit Packwood or not, by hurling insults and attacking a perceived outsider the Royal Navy showed its hostility to smuggling to the townspeople, re-enforcing a regime of fear across the harbour.

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The waterfront mob then made their manoeuvre, as Captain Reid was still on shore, within the grasp of the mob, they did not attack Reid—rather they used him to gain access to their real targets. The mob implored Reid to order the *Liberty* back into dock at the harbour, so the men responsible for the terrorising of Captain Packwood could be held culpable for their actions. Reid agreed, falling for the mob’s ploy. In dock, the mob could strike and assert their authority. The Newport waterfront community proudly felt ownership over this space and knew that once in dock—in their territory—they could strike and begin to ritually demonstrate their power. Reid had been fooled into thinking that the mob intended to resolve this dispute through legal means, but the smuggling-haven of Newport preferred extra-legal action.

As soon as the *Liberty* docked, the mob clambered aboard, cut its cables, sawed off its main mast, scuttled the ship and dragged it to Goat Island. There it was burnt and one of the *Liberty*’s longboats stolen, hauled out of the water, up the Long Wharf and burnt on Broad Street. In the chaos, Packwood hoisted full sail on his Connecticut sloop and hurried out of the harbour and into the anonymity of the Atlantic. An offshoot of the mob took it upon themselves to free a different sloop from the docks, the *Sally*, one that Reid had previously taken into custody.\(^{39}\) The disabling of the *Liberty*—cutting its cables and sawing its mast—as well as the long procession between Goat Island and the docks and ritual of boat burning which followed, each represent a retaliatory waterfront terrorisation of the Royal Navy and imperial authority by Newporters. The tradition of boat-burning was not the only ritual of waterfront control which became common in the pre-revolutionary docks. Another method in which the mob could obstruct and threaten the waterfront inspection regime was popularised in this era—physical assaults on customs officers; including the most famous iteration of this, tarring and feathering.

Philadelphia customs collector John Swift made a name for himself in 1769, making persistent attempts to crack down on illegal stores of wine, triggering violent response on the wharves. On 1 April 1769, acting on a tip-off, Swift and his officers broke open a warehouse “by the water side” owned by Andrew Hodges, discovering fifty barrels of seemingly undeclared Madeira wine. Swift took the brig *Eagle*, which he was informed had transported the cargo, and placed his own padlock on the warehouse as an act of formal repossession of the wine. Within hours, the local populace began to congregate around the warehouse and armed themselves in order to prevent Swift and his officers from physically removing the wine, threatening to kill the customs men if they dared. Swift called in the constabulary to assist him in dispersing the mob. But the defiant mob, outnumbering Swift’s small collection of lawmen, formally “ordered the Constables off the wharf”.\textsuperscript{40} The next night, the mob hit back in a twofold approach. First, they forced entry into Hodges warehouse and purportedly snuck the wine into several awaiting small craft in the river, meaning that Swift could no longer distinguish smuggled cargo from other wine shipments. Following this, the mob accosted customs surveyor William Sheppard—one of Swift’s subordinates personally known for collecting loading fees—seized him and beat him within an inch of his life.\textsuperscript{41} Altogether, the verbal threat of expulsion, ordering the customs officers and constabulary away from the wharves, and physical intimidation in the form of Sheppard’s beating, reinforced local claims to supremacy at the dockside loading zone.

In Newport, Jesse Saville was hired out of London to take up the position of tidewaiter in the Rhode Island customs office. But his arrival was anticipated and opposed by locals. Nine days after arriving in the town, around 8 p.m. on 18 May 1769, when Saville made his way

\textsuperscript{40} TNA PRO, T1/471/379, D. Collector and Comptroller of Philadelphia to Commissioners of Customs; TNA PRO T1/471/393, Surveyor and Searcher of Philadelphia to the Commissioners of Customs; TNA PRO T1/471/401 John Williams, Esq., Inspector General to the Commissioners of Customs.

back to his lodgings, a group of seven men assaulted and detained him, proceeding to gag him with a handkerchief and have him “Carried down a Wharff”. He was then thrown on a wheelbarrow, threatened “with Death by Drowning”, stripped of his “Turpentined … from head to feet” and doused with feathers. The process of dragging and wheelbarrowing Saville was just as much as act of control and domination as the tarring ritual. The message was clear. The wharves were the domain of the town’s local workforce, not the customs office.

With resentments from the beating of William Sheppard in April still fresh, Philadelphia collector John Swift found himself embroiled in a second wharfside battle. In October, Swift again successfully made a seizure of a wholesale quantity of wine, this time from a ship in the Delaware River. The local populace did not attack Swift; they were more interested in cutting off the supply of information and in aggressively reinforcing their code of silence on smuggling on the waterfront. Philadelphians assembled at Carpenter’s Wharf and are told to have immediately grabbed the supposed informant, “poured some Buckets of Tar upon his Head, & then Feathered him.” The victim was then beaten, dragged through the streets, aboard a boat on the waterfront and across the Delaware to the New Jersey bank of the river, where they warned him never to come back over to the Philadelphia side. Not only did this violent ritual of intimidation repossess the space from an increasingly diligent customs system, it also created a comforting sense of physical distance between the Philadelphia waterfront and subversive persons. Swift later asserted that the riot was started by “some sailors who were I suppose set on by the merchants.”

This may be Swift editorialising or looking for someone to blame, but it speaks to a larger themes in these waterfront incidents which we have surveyed—seen prominently in the beating and jailing of George Spencer in New York in

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42 TNA PRO T1/471/386, Jesse Saville Tide Waiter at Rhode Island to the Commissioners of Customs.
44 Rao, National Duties, 15; Jensen, Maritime Commerce, 150.
1757—merchants together with wharfside labourers and mariners as mutual stakeholders in the wharf to reclaim control over waterfront exchanges for local trading purposes.

Seventeen days later, on 28 October, the waterfront mob in Boston discovered what it believed to be another informant, George Gailer. The man’s genuine guilt is unknown, but he was perceived to have notified authorities about smuggling operations undertaken by John Hancock’s *Liberty* and another sloop named the *Success*. Accordingly, the mob, stripped Gailer naked, “painted him all over with Tar & then covered him Feathers”. The victim was then carted around the city, with the mob “hazzaring” as he went, throwing stones and assaulting him with “Clubbs, Staves and a hand saw”. For three hours, the parade went on, effectively reclaiming the waterfront for the night.46 These acts of assault and of tarring—far from the only ones which occurred in this time period—seen in their localised purpose, represent a ritualised performance of contested waterfront authority.47

**The Tea Party**

For our final example, we look to the famous Boston Tea Party, to a new kind of anti-customs protest: attacks on commodities. On 28 November 1773, the teaship *Dartmouth*, docked at Griffin’s Wharf, shortly followed by the *Beaver* and the *Eleanor*. Once again, Bostonians made their way to the docks and demanded that the three ships leave Griffin’s Wharf immediately and return back across the Atlantic. Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson refused to budge and ordered that the ships stay put. The mob manoeuvred the situation into an impasse, by physically tying the ships to the wharf and stopping any attempts of the ships’ captains to place any of its crates of tea off the ship and onto the docks. Quickly initiating a militia-like discipline, Bostonian men “kept a constant military watch of 25 men every night.” In a now

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47 Carp, *Rebels Rising*, 54.
familiar procedure, the forces of imperial governance, Hutchinson, military men and members of the customs service, escaped to the safety of Castle William. The military officers—Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Leslie and Rear Admiral John Montagu—split with Governor Hutchinson on a proposed resolution to the problem and began to take matters into their own hands. Montagu unilaterally sent two of his ships into the harbour as an intimidation tactic. Leslie lobbied hard to launch scouting parties of men to the wharves to gather intelligence for an assault on the mob.\textsuperscript{48} Not for the first time, a split between military and civil authority emerged in dealing with waterfront disputes.

After a stalemate of nineteen days, on 16 December, at a meeting at the Old South Meeting House, local forces took action.\textsuperscript{49} As Benjamin Carp notes, the make-up of the leaders of this crowd is also revealing of the waterfront community’s influence in proceedings. These men include: wharfinger Thomas Moore, Lendall Pitts (son of the wharfinger James Pitts), shipjoiner Thomas Urann, shipwright Samuel Howard, oarmaker John Hooton Jr. and ropemaker Edward C. Howe. Those who privately owned the wharves, operated waterfront stores and worked on the docks daily—led the charge.\textsuperscript{50} At the meeting, cheers erupted of “Hurrah for Griffin’s Wharf” and men dressed in Native American garb jumped aboard the ships and threw 342 crates of tea into the waters of the harbour.\textsuperscript{51} The fact that at the Meeting House the mob had cheered together, for “Griffin’s Wharf”, asserting their own sense of local ownership of this waterfront space tell us that the wharves meant something to those in the city and was, to them, worth fighting for. If we tie the chronicle of the Boston Tea Party to the space in which it occurred we gain new insight into the importance of, and the struggle to control waterfront space in British American cities.

\textsuperscript{49} Slaughter, \textit{Independence}, 344.
\textsuperscript{50} Carp, \textit{Rebels Rising}, 56–57.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Boston Gazette}, 20 December 1773; Slaughter, \textit{Independence}, 344.
Conclusion

With increasing subversion, emerged a greater commitment to regain imperial control. As we can see through these numerous examples from across British American port-cities, this territorial contest between imperial revenue and illicit local capital played out, inexorably, at the docks. The British Empire relied on its customs service for revenue, but it faced momentous obstructions in these waterfront operations. Local urban citizens wished to preserve their illicit economy and to do this the imperial customs checkpoint had to be obstructed. The influential private financial interests of the dominating merchant-smuggler class, who owned the wharves and sought to conduct private enterprise on them, regularly and expertly subverted customs procedure and town mobs often violently opposed and sabotaged customs seizures. With all this, imperial revenue came to be threatened and disrupted by conflict at the waterfront.\footnote{Rao, \textit{National Duties}, 23.}
Conclusion

The coming of the Revolutionary War would alter the colonial nature of the docks. No longer would the particular tension between local investment and imperial revenue be a major factor in port-city life. As has been traced throughout this thesis, the waterfront represented a nexus of exchange for both people and goods. As hostilities turned into open warfare, these wharves would be not just a point of entry and exit—for the littoral transportation of passengers and wholesale commodities—but this interchange would be selected for use in military occupation, as a beachhead for invading armies. In the midst of war and rebellion would alter how the waterside was utilised, its essential geographic role in shipping and commerce, however, would remain.

Following on from the Boston Port Act of 1774—which we began with—five out of the six cities covered in this thesis would be subject to sieges and port blockades by British forces: Boston (1775), New York (1776), Philadelphia (1777), Newport (1778), and Charleston (1780).¹ Kingston offers an important exception, which, generally, we can attribute this exception to the circumstances of economy and culture in the British West Indies—too closely tied to the Empire to justify open rebellion.² In North America, imperial redcoats marched upon wharves putting a stop to the commercial movements which these structures were built to symbolise, as well as facilitate. In these extremes measures, we see need for military control over trade that underpinned the British fiscal-military state. These attempts to achieve hegemony over the docks would be the last throes of the British imperialism, which we have surveyed here, into this space. Studying these ports, however, during and after the Revolution, with the emergence of both the United States and what historians term the ‘Second British

Empire’, would produce, a no less useful, but (given the transformation of political conditions) quite different, investigation to this one.

But, broadening our scope, we may see these patterns of spatial investment, control, and negotiation over the waterfront in other ports. This type of spatial history survey could possibly extend across time and space of the early modern age, into other developing colonial ports in the Americas, to other empires, as well as into the Asiatic and Pacific worlds. For port-cities that developed in great strides in the eighteenth century, the docks take on a particular significance as a central, lived and worked space. As port-cities moved into the nineteenth century, the waterfront would lose certain elements of its functional centrality. As indicated in the beginning of this thesis, the industrial port which developed in the nineteenth century would gradually divert economic activity away from a waterfront-based system of wholesaling.

Having noted all this, what does this specific focus on the colonial waterfront tell us about early modern imperial practice? Broadly, it is noteworthy that in this thesis, we have discovered a general deficiency in imperial control over exchanges of people and goods on the colonial docks. In the British American context, at the water’s edge, we can discern the limitations, in practice, of the eighteenth century British fiscal-military state. Some of this disorder, and the consequent limitations, stemmed from an inability to negotiate the intricacies of local governance. In times of environmental catastrophe, such as disease epidemics and natural disasters, little was said or done in London. Westminster saw incidental destruction as outside of their remit. When it came to issues of military importance, or issues affecting revenue, however, sweeping action was taken by the metropole to secure its supply lines. But even in such endeavours, it often faced violent obstruction, emanating from local attachment to, and will to protect, the built environment of the waterfront.

Functioning as a wholesale marketplace and a hub of industry and transportation, the docks held enormous economic and security value at a local level, particularly in the tenuous
colonial setting of the Age of Sail. More than this, as a locally funded, built, and owned infrastructure, representing civic prosperity and endeavour, this was an emotional, affective space. We have seen this demonstrated in numerous cases: the public mourning in the wake of a fire or a storm; the panic over infection in instances of contagion; the anxiety over press gang raids; or the rage over customs seizures.

When this significant region came under threat—whether disrupted by environmental factors, or by co-opted by imperial forces—the communal determination of local capital and labour worked to defend it and to assert some form of ownership or control over dockside exchanges, sometimes in the face of imperial objectives. Thus, the waterfront generated regular wharfside battles over dominion and control. Observing this tension leads us to the understanding that, while experiencing remarkable growth on the American continent, the British state still displayed administrative and commercial vulnerability, even in what it considered a core element of its mercantilist extraction process—its port facilities.

This thesis has wider implications for the study of early modern empires. I would argue that a greater focus on the functions of the colonial docks in the Age of Sail, and their use and meaning in the practice of the empire, can improve our understanding of trade, shipping, and governance in the early modern context.
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