

## Trade Between the Colonies

When Patrick Henry said, “I am not a Virginian, but an American,” he pointed out an important truth about the British colonists. Before the Revolution, they lived under individual governments tied to England, not to each other. Yet after the Declaration of Independence, citizens of the thirteen colonies quickly discovered a common political identity, created by more than one hundred years of trading with each other.

Early colonists imported manufactured goods from England because, until the 1700s, even the largest North American towns did not produce such items. In the North, these products entered the colonies through Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. While some items would be sold in the city or the nearby countryside, much of the cargo would be transferred to smaller vessels that moved up the coast or along navigable rivers. These traders resold the goods in towns such as Plymouth, Massachusetts; Newport, Rhode Island; or Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; they then returned with farm products to be sold in the cities.

This trade connected each large city to a group of smaller towns; and more than glass, lead, or paper passed among them. The coastal traders carried news and passengers; merchants and farmers who lived hundreds of miles apart became trading partners. These exchanges encouraged colonists from different areas to get to know each other and to understand how their lives depended on each other. Most colonists received their news from Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, not directly from London.

In the South, ships carrying rice or tobacco usually docked at plantation wharves and exchanged their goods directly, which made it difficult for cities to grow in the Southern colonies. Between Maryland and Georgia, only Charleston, South Carolina, had a population greater than 10,000 people in 1776; and Southern colonists seemed to be tied more closely to England than to their neighboring colonies.

Nevertheless, Southern planters also imported food from the North to feed their slaves, while colonists in Pennsylvania, New York, and New England bought tobacco and rice. This trade depended on other small ships traveling up and down the Atlantic Coast among the colonies. News and ideas followed the trade, and people established friendships among different colonies.

Because the trade between colonies was not taxed, British government officials never actually saw it. Once the Revolution started, the speed with which people from the thirteen colonies united as Americans shocked the British. An almost invisible trading network had helped to create the new nation.

