

# Culture and Consumption: National Drinks and National Identity in the Atlantic World<sup>1</sup>

*Michelle Craig McDonald & Steven Topik*

## Introduction

Economic historians recognize the spread of perishable and durable luxury goods as an important motor of growth for the world economy. Fashion-conscious elites and their imitators in search of distinction or utility joined profit-seeking merchants, shippers, and manufacturers to fuel the transoceanic dispersal of silks, spices, and porcelain as well as sugar, tea, and coffee that created new trade patterns and markets.<sup>2</sup> Culture, in this sense, was as important as economics to the growth of long-distance transactions and the shaping and defining of luxury goods through socially constructed desires beyond mere physiological necessity.

Consumer goods—and foods in particular—also played central roles in the creation of *national* identities, for while consumption became more diffuse, ingestion remained tempered by local rituals and adaptations. Coffee has become identified as quintessentially American as tea is British or Chinese, beer German, and wine French. It occupies a central role as an

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors delivered an earlier version of this paper at the Conference on Food and Globalization at New Hall, Cambridge, England, June 9, 2006. They would like to thank Alexander Nutzenadel and Frank Trentmann for that opportunity and Sidney Mintz for his penetrating comments.

<sup>2</sup> John Willis makes this point in “European Consumption and Asian Production in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, pp. 133-147. Sidney Mintz in “Changing Roles of Food” p. 266, calls coffee, tea, cocoa, tobacco and sugar “among the first modern commodities” which “marked a turning point in western history.” which Carole Shammas agrees with in “Consumption from 1550 to 1800”, p. 199. The three articles are in *Consumption and the World of Goods* edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: 1993).

indelible symbol of independence from British authority and British culture that embodies what Sidney Mintz has called “tasting freedom,” the act of cultural self-fashioning through cuisine.<sup>3</sup> This paper explores how coffee became part of American identity.<sup>4</sup> In particular, it examines the relationship of coffee to freedom in popular accounts of United States’ history, as well as its role in America’s global commerce and cultural diffusion. The connections between coffee and freedom—and between U.S. nationalist and internationalist iconography—are tenacious and contradictory. Coffee was touted as a patriotic proxy for tea during the economic embargoes of the 1760s; as diplomatic leverage for international recognition of the early republic; as a symbol of westward expansion; and as motivation for American imperialism and annexation policies in the late nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Thus coffee has been linked to American state building, nation building, continentalism and globalism. How did an African plant, transplanted to the Caribbean and Central and South America, become a symbol of (North) Americanism? Much of the literature assumes that America’s taste for coffee is natural, almost organic. It requires—and receives—little explanation. But coffee’s diffusion was neither predestined nor natural; it resulted instead from a confluence of historically specific cultural, social, and political influences.

The transformation of coffee from luxury beverage in the seventeenth century to mass consumer drink by the mid-nineteenth century reinforced its egalitarian and democratic symbolic import to Thomas Paine, Hector St. John, and Alexis de Tocqueville and other purveyors of the American myth

---

<sup>3</sup> S. Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (Boston:1996), pp. 13,14.

<sup>4</sup> W. Ukers, *All About Coffee*, (NY: 1935, pp. 103,789. Some of the nicknames were less democratic such as “king” or “aristocrat” of the breakfast table.

<sup>5</sup> See F. Fulgate, *Arbuckles: The Coffee that Won the West* (El Paso, 1994). That two major roasters, Folgers and Hills Brothers, arose in the middle of the nineteenth century in San Francisco adds to the trans-continental coffee story.

of equality.<sup>6</sup> But political tracts and travellers' accounts are only one way to gauge coffee's increasing importance in American life. Merchant account books document coffee's sale to mariners, brewers, labourers, widows, and even free blacks by the 1760s; the private correspondence of Boston and Philadelphia women like Abigail Adams and Elizabeth Drinker describe its popularity among the well-to-do in the 1780s and 1790s; and even enslaved labourers received coffee as payment for overwork in Virginia iron works by the 1820s.<sup>7</sup> So common were coffee pots and cups on American tables, that European visitors considered the commodity an indelible part of the new nation's identity within years of independence. "Our supper was rather scanty," wrote François Jean Chastellux, a French traveller to Virginia in 1787, "but our breakfast the next morning was better...we are perfectly reconciled to this American custom of drinking coffee."<sup>8</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States led the world in coffee consumption as well as importation, though the commodity's foreign pedigree was usually erased. Domestic coffee roasters such as Lion & Arbuckles and White House Coffee chose American landscapes or the familiar face of Uncle Sam instead of exotic of foreign imagery for their

---

<sup>6</sup> J.H. St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Philadelphia: 1793), A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: 1840); T. Paine, *The American Crisis* (Norwich, CT.: 1776).

<sup>7</sup> Mifflin and Massey, Ledger, 1761-63, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; A. Adams to J. Adams, July 5, 1775, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; E. Forman Crane, et. al.(eds.), *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker* 3 vols. (Boston, 1991), 3: 1081, 1081n, and 2016; C. B. Dew, *Bonds of Iron; Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York, 1994), p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> Marquis de François Jean Chastellux, *Travels in North America/ by the Marquis de Chastellux; translated from the French by an English Gentleman...; with notes by the translator*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1787), 2:52.

advertisements and trade cards.<sup>9</sup> On the rare occasion that provenance was divulged, Java and Mocha, which held historical appeal but no longer produced much coffee for the U.S. market, were mentioned despite the fact that most Americans' coffee came from the Caribbean or South America. Indeed, on the western frontier coffee was known as "jamoca," a combination of "java" and "mocha."<sup>10</sup> Overall, however, coffee was largely divorced from its place of origin—geographically sanitized—in the campaign to supplant tea as the all-American drink.<sup>11</sup>

Military campaigns played a pivotal role in coffee's assimilation into American dietary habits. During the Civil War, Union troops considered coffee necessary for martial victory. General Sherman deemed it "the essential element of the ration," concluding that "the coffee and sugar ration

---

<sup>9</sup> See the Hills Brothers archives in the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. for examples of nineteenth-century trade cards. Also see Fulgate, *Arbuckles* pp. 117-137.

<sup>10</sup> Fulgate, *Arbuckles*, p. 68; J. Rischbieter has shown in "Globalizing Consumption: Coffee trade and consumption in imperial Germany," delivered at the Food and Globalization: Markets, Migration, and Politics in Transnational Perspective, Leipzig, Germany (September 2005), that in Germany, which like the U.S. mainly imported coffee from Brazil and Guatemala, it was sold often with pictures of Africans on containers in Kolonialwaren (colonial goods) stores. The Germans accentuated the foreign and the exotic, the American incorporated coffee into an American myth. For U.S. ads see: *The Tea and Coffee Journal* and *The Spice Mill*. The rare moments when foreign coffee workers were prominent in commercials was in the campaigns undertaken by the joint U.S.-Brazil Coffee Campaign in the 1920s, studied by M. Seigal, "Trading Races: Transnational Conversations and Construction of Race in the U.S. and Brazil after WWI," unpublished manuscript. They appear again in the 1930s and 1940s under the influence of the Good Neighbour Policy as S. McCormick has shown in an unpublished paper. The Colombian Federación de Café, which created "Juan Valdez" together with the Ayers Advertising Company, cemented coffee growers in the American consciousness. For more see P. McCormick, "Juan Valdez: The Story of 100% Colombian Coffee," unpublished paper, U.C. Irvine (Winter 2006) and M.C. McDonald, "The Real Juan Valdez: Opportunities and Impoverishment in Global Coffee," Harvard Business School Working Paper Series, No. 9-806-041 (November 2005): 1-23.

<sup>11</sup> Some coffee was no longer even coffee at all; grains such as rye or bran mixed with molasses, was often served as coffee in the South and West. Howard Ruede, *Sod-House Days, Letters from a Kansas Homesteader, 1877-1878*, edited by John Ise (New York: 1966), p. 99. See also Francis Thurber, *Coffee from Plantation to Cup* (New York: 1881) for a learned discussion of coffee adulteration.

be carried along, even at the expense of bread, for which there are many substitutes.”<sup>12</sup> Those shirking their duty became known as “coffee coolers,” an epithet for “shiftless, superannuated loungers.”<sup>13</sup> By the early twentieth century, coffee had been renamed “cup of Joe” in honour of its close identification with “G.I. Joe” in World War I and II and recognition of its contributions to America’s overseas efforts. When the war ended, coffee drinking spilled over into civilian life. A 1937 *Fortune* magazine article reported that “a blending of old socialites and new celebrities called Café Society” was on the rise, and other sources noted the increasing appearance of “coffee breaks” among both white and blue collar workers.<sup>14</sup> Coffee had become part of American life—civilian and military, elite and proletarian, male and female alike.

### **Coffee and the Boston Tea Party**

America’s interest in coffee began almost as early as colonization itself. John Smith, one of the first English settlers in Virginia, described “coffa” or “coava” in accounts of his travels through Turkey almost twenty years before the first coffeehouse opened in England. Pilgrims leaving from Holland, Europe’s main coffee entrepôt, might well have brought beans with them, and Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam and French settlers in New Orleans both imported coffee by the mid-seventeenth century and early

---

<sup>12</sup> W.T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*.(Rpt. New York, NY: 1990), p. 882.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Chicago: 1923), p. 123 and *Oxford English Dictionary On-line*, entry for “coffee.”

<sup>14</sup> *Fortune* (December 1937), p. 123; the *OED* claims that coffee breaks were written into labor contracts after 1951. The Pan American Coffee Bureau popularized the concept after 1952 according to Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds* (New York: 1999), p. 242.

eighteenth century respectively.<sup>15</sup> Despite this early introduction, coffee drinking in North America grew slowly. Coffeehouses clustered in port cities limiting opportunities of rural Americans to participate in public consumption, and cost curbed its incursion into private homes, the principal drinking sites of non-alcoholic beverages. William Penn complained in 1683 that British taxing and transport policies raised the price of coffee to a stunning 18 shillings and 9 pence per pound, well beyond the means of most colonial families. Though the price of coffee dropped over the next century, largely because of expanding Caribbean production, coffee consumption remained low in North America, only one-eighteenth of a pound per capita by 1783 or enough to brew a cup or two of coffee per person a year.<sup>16</sup>

Both popular and scholarly histories argue that the Boston Tea Party forever changed America's relationship to coffee. "It is sufficient here to refer to the climax of agitation against the fateful tea tax," observed William Ukers, long-time editor of *The Tea and Coffee Journal*, a leading publication of the coffee industry, "because it is undoubtedly responsible for our becoming a nation of coffee drinkers instead of tea drinkers, like the English." The Boston Tea Party of 1773, he continues, "caused coffee to be crowned 'king of the American breakfast table' and the sovereign drink of the American people."<sup>17</sup> More recent popular coffee studies by Mark Pendegrast, John Beilenson, and Gregory Dicum and Nina Luttinger agree with Ukers.<sup>18</sup> Dicum and Luttinger go so far as to propose that "European

---

<sup>15</sup> 1603-30 CAPT. SMITH Trav. & Adv. 25 Their [Turkes'] best drinke is Coffaa of a graine they call Coava. Cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* on-line; W. Ukers, *All About Coffee* (New York, 1922).

<sup>16</sup> F.B. Thurber, *Coffee: From Plantation to Cup* (London, 1881), p. 212. By contrast, tea imports at the time were only one-twelfth a pound per capita. Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p. 400.

<sup>17</sup> W. Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p. 102-103.

<sup>18</sup> M. Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How it Transformed the World* (New York, 1999), p. 15; J. Beilenson, *The Book of Coffee* (White Plains, NY,

colonialism seemed to dictate where coffee was cultivated and drunk, in the case of the United States, it was the end of colonialism, dramatically reflected in the Boston Tea Party, that marked its rise to prominence.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, gender historians link coffee drinking to grassroots tea boycotts to demonstrate women’s participation in both consumer culture and U.S. politics and the creation of a “Republican Motherhood” in the 1780s, an ideology that saw women as pivotal vehicles for the transmission of democratic ideas to the next generation of American citizens.<sup>20</sup>

At first glance, manuscript sources seem to support these interpretations. In the summer of 1774, for instance, John Adams recorded that, while traversing the Massachusetts backcountry to gauge popular political opinion, he asked Mrs. Huston, an innkeeper, “Is it lawful...for a weary Traveller to refresh himself with a Dish of Tea, providing it has been honestly smuggled, or paid no Duties?” Mrs. Huston reportedly replied, “No sir...we have renounced all Tea in this Place. I can’t make tea...but [can] make you Coffee.” Thereafter, Adams professed to “have drank coffee every afternoon since, and have bourned it well.” Tea, he concluded, “must be universally renounced. I must be weaned, and the sooner, the better.”<sup>21</sup>

---

1995), p. 24; G. Dicum and N. Luttinger, *The Coffee Book: Anatomy of an Industry from Crop to the Last Drop* (New York, 1999), p. 34 said that after the Boston Tea Party “coffee was viewed as a patriotic act and drinking tea was seen as un-American.”

<sup>19</sup> G. Dicum and N. Luttinger, *The Coffee Book*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> L. Kerber first coined the phrase “Republican Motherhood” in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980). The term has also been used by: M.B. Norton *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca N.Y.: 1980); T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution. How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (NY: 2004); C. Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers. Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence* (NY: 2005); and L. Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (NY: 2002), pp. 27, 44. Withey argues that not only did Abigail oppose “that noxious weed” [tea] but also John got his start in politics at a Boston coffeehouse.

<sup>21</sup> J. Adams to A. Adams, July 6, 1774, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Adams' recollection is one of the few to compare coffee and tea in writing during the colonial period and implies that the two caffeine beverages were, if not equally desirable, at least gastronomically interchangeable. More importantly, it demonstrates that some Americans—in this case a rural innkeeper and Continental Congressional representative—identified coffee with American ideas of freedom.

But the association was short-lived. American embargoes of British goods in 1765 and 1769 focused on Britain and Ireland but a third inter-colonial boycott in 1774, beginning just months after Adams' Massachusetts excursion, included the British Caribbean which was America's chief coffee supplier. Coffee, in other words, became as politically charged as tea. Some colonial representatives pleaded that banning West Indian trade "must produce a national Bankruptcy" but their arguments received short shrift from those who considered Caribbean commodities like coffee "intoxicating poisons and needless luxuries" that should be sunk at sea "rather than [brought] ashore."<sup>22</sup> By 1777, even Adams had changed his mind about coffee, counselling his wife Abigail, "I hope the females will leave off their attachment to coffee. I assure you, the best families in this place have left off in a great measure the use of West India goods. We much bring ourselves to live upon the produce of our own country."<sup>23</sup> Abigail, however, reported that many females were "loath to give up" their coffee going so far as to have their own Boston coffee party. Her letter described more than a hundred women who circumvented British colonial customs authorities by

---

<sup>22</sup> J. Adams, *Autobiography*, "Travels and Negotiations," p. 20 (entry dated May 6, 1778).

<sup>23</sup> J. Adams to A. Adams, July 6, 1775 and August 11, 1777, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Adams wrote in response to a July 30 letter from Abigail in which she described an incident in which more than one hundred women manhandled Boston merchant Thomas Boyleston and forced him to sell a hogshead of coffee from his warehouse. *Adams Family Correspondence*, 2: 295-296.



openly seizing a profiteer's coffee hoard—not to throw into Massachusetts Bay but to take home and drink.<sup>24</sup>

Adams' aversion for coffee—or tea—however, extended only so far. As part of a delegation in the French Court in 1778, Adams “drank coffee with Mr. Lee at his house” before proceeding to Mr. Chaumont's family to “drink tea” and “spend the rest of the evening in reading Cardinal Richelieu.” Fellow delegate Benjamin Franklin, however, had a definite caffeine preference—choosing bourgeois coffeehouses over aristocratic tea salons.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to ascribe purely political motivations to Adams' decision to drink coffee with fellow Americans and tea with Europeans or Franklin's choice to eschew tea entirely—both commodities had bad reputations in America at the time. More likely, coffee's and tea's symbolic power stopped at the Atlantic ocean and Adams' and Franklin's behaviour reflected personal preference rather than gastronomic nationalism.<sup>26</sup> Not until the 1780s would coffee become an important part of America's international aspirations, and then its rise based more on commercial and diplomatic grounds than on culinary ones.

### **Coffee as the Drink of Diplomats**

Before independence, most North Americans' coffee came from Britain's colonies in Jamaica, Grenada, Saint Vincent, and Dominica. But following American independence, Parliament banned shipments of British colonial produce in U.S. vessels, and did so precisely when American

---

<sup>24</sup> Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p. 400

<sup>25</sup> W. Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin, an American Life* (New York, 2003), pp. 181, 188.

<sup>26</sup> By the 1790s, however, the political power of coffee became more explicit. Alexander Hamilton combined coffee and tea with domestically produced wine and spirits as “luxuries” that should be taxed to reduce consumption, an early form of “sin” tax. R. Chernox *Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 2004), p. 300.

interest in the commodity was booming.<sup>27</sup> Pre-Revolutionary coffee imports peaked at just over \$1 million dollars in 1774, but British West Indian coffee alone into the U.S. was worth \$1,480,000 per annum from 1802 to 1804 while coffee imports from the rest of the world topped \$8 million.<sup>28</sup>

Analysis of America's early coffee trade affords an opportunity to study the interplay of economic and political initiatives. Post-Revolutionary merchants had more choice in coffee suppliers but their success still relied on access to the West Indies which, in 1783, was unstable. American importers repeatedly clashed with American farmers who sought tariffs on foreign imports—even those destined as re-exports—in retaliation for taxes other nations imposed on American products overseas. Historians have argued that America scrambled to find a political and commercial foothold and secure its hard-won independence during these first years. Salvation came only with the outbreak of war between Britain and France in 1793 which allowed expansion of America's trans-Atlantic carrying trade and encouraged domestic production.<sup>29</sup> The result was supposedly an autonomous U.S. national economy by the early nineteenth century. But, in their zeal to prove America's financial independence, these historians underestimate the continued importance of Caribbean commodities to early American economic development. Close attention to changes in the post-

---

<sup>27</sup> *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1832-61). The volumes of greatest importance to this paper are "Commerce and Navigation," volume V (1789-1815) and "Foreign Relations," volumes I (1789-1797) and II (1797-1807). Hereafter the American State Papers will be noted as *ASPCN* (Commerce and Navigation) or *ASPFR* (Foreign Relations), with volume and page numbers. The above reference is from *ASPCN*, V: 640.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, V: 640-642.

<sup>29</sup> C.P. Nettels, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775-1815* (New York, 1962).

Revolutionary coffee trade demonstrates just how intertwined these regions remained.<sup>30</sup>

Figures 1, 2 and 3 compare coffee imports into North American colonies, later states, as a percentage of total U.S. trade. In 1770, Philadelphia accounted for over half of all coffee imports. Coffee contributed significantly to the livelihood of the city's merchants as well as backcountry wheat and livestock farmers who produced the kinds of goods most often exchanged for coffee and coastal brokers and stores throughout the thirteen colonies that took Philadelphia's coffee in trade.<sup>31</sup> In 1790 (figure 2), Philadelphia's share of coffee imports declined but still surpassed the volume of trade into other states. By 1810 (figure 3), more coffee came into Philadelphia than ever before, though its percentage of the overall U.S. trade dropped below twenty per cent. This does not mean that coffee had become less profitable—in fact, quite the opposite. Importation was now more widely distributed meaning coffee was not only an important component of Pennsylvania's economy, but also those of New York, Baltimore, Boston, and other port cities.

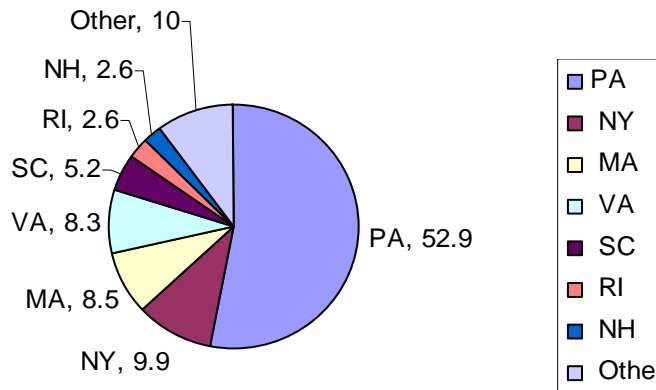
---

<sup>30</sup> Economic historians from D. North on acknowledge the importance of the re-export trade—American commerce in predominantly tropical commodities produced outside the U.S.—to the 1780s and 1790s, but have rarely examined the nature of these goods directly D. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790-1860* (New York, 1966), pp. 24-45. See also: H. Bell, "British Commercial Policy in the West Indies, 1783-93," *English Historical Review* 31:123 (July 1916): 429-441; E. Buron, "Statistics on Franco-American Trade, 1778-1806," *Journal of Economic and Business History* 4 (1931-32): 571-580; G. Bjork, "The Weaning of the American Economy: Independence, Market Changes, and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic History* 24:4 (Dec. 1964): 541-560; D.R. Adams, Jr., "American Neutrality and Prosperity, 1793-1808: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Economic History* 40:4 (Dec. 1980)" 713-737; C. Golden and F.D. Lewis, "The Role of Exports in American Economic Growth during the Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1807," *Explorations in Economic History* 17 (1980): 6-26

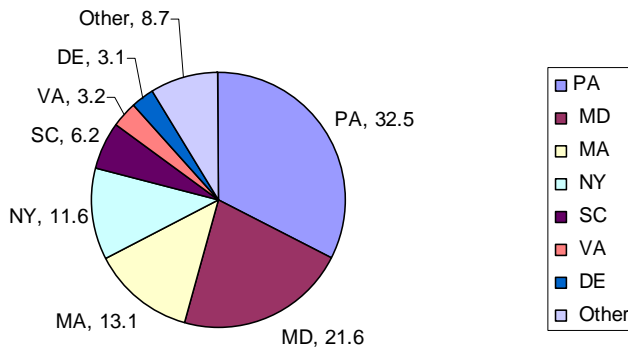
<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the relationship of West Indies imports to America's grain industry see B. Hunter, "The Rage for Grain: Milling in the Mid-Atlantic, 1750-1815," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 2001, especially chapters 2 and 3.

Over half of the coffee arriving into North America left shortly thereafter. Philadelphia had reshipped coffee to neighbouring colonies during the British colonial period, but America's re-export trade by 1800 had become thoroughly international.

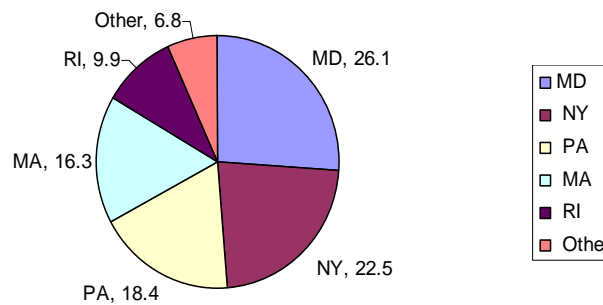
**Figure 1: Coffee Imports into North America by Colony/State, 1770**



**Figure 2: Coffee Imports into North America by Colony/State, 1790**



**Figure 3: Coffee Imports into North America by Colony/State, 1810**



**Source:** Figures derived from coffee listed in Customs 16/1: America, 1768-1772; Records of the Philadelphia Custom House, Records Group 36, Inward and Outward Entry Volumes (E1057); and ASPCN, V and VI.

Table 1 compares domestic and re-exported coffees as a percentage of total trade. Initially, much of America’s coffee re-exports went to Amsterdam, Paris, and London, but after 1790 U.S. traders made new inroads into Germany, Italy, and Russia. Because tropical goods generally, and coffee especially, were important to American interests, U.S. access to the West

Table 1: U.S. Coffee Imports and Re-Exports, 1800-1805

Year	Domestic Imports (lbs.)	% of Total	Re-Exports (lbs.)	% of Total Trade	TOTAL
<b>1800</b>	36,709,317	43.6%	47,389,946	56.4%	84,099,263
<b>1801</b>	44,890,182	43.9%	57,383,904	56.1%	102,274,086
<b>1802</b>	36,162,859	46.9%	40,886,861	53.1%	77,049,720
<b>1803</b>	10,105,240	37.5%	16,828,493	62.5%	26,933,733
<b>1804</b>	48,105,304	49.7%	48,638,382	50.3%	96,743,686
<b>1805</b>	45,823,329	44.9%	56,141,320	55.1%	101,964,649

**Source:** Percentages derived by comparing total coffee re-export revenue of \$7,302,000 to total re-export revenue of \$28,533,000 as they appear in *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1832-1861), “Commerce and Navigation.” V: 612-672.

Indies was a serious concern. Once Americans left the British imperial system, they lost their major coffee supplier and were ingenious about finding alternatives. Some American merchants turned to smuggling to meet demand, but many more relied on international competition, legal loopholes, and especially government intervention to expand their businesses.

Congress drafted a “plan of treaties” based on the principles of free trade even before the American Revolution ended. Though merchants and farmers bitterly debated the pros and cons of tariffs for goods that competed with American manufactures, they more often agreed on trade concessions

for commodities America did not produce. Tea and coffee figured prominently in these discussions since, by 1774, delegates recognized that both “enter largely into the consumption of the country, and have become articles of necessity to all classes.”<sup>32</sup>

Few countries initially gave the plan of treaties serious consideration except France, whose prerequisite of political alliance stretched the plan’s “commerce only” ideals. After independence, however, U.S. legislators hoped that nations reticent to trade with a rebel government would be more willing to open their countries and colonies to a legitimate one, and appointed a three-man European Commission—John Jay, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin—to oversee negotiations and authorize treaties with several European nations and the Barbary Coast.<sup>33</sup> Their multi-national approach was designed to limit American reliance on Britain, explore new trade partnerships in Europe, and reopen commercial relations in the Caribbean.<sup>34</sup> The “plan of treaties” was an ambitious endeavour for any nation, much less the fledgling United States. With only a small army and rag-tag body of privateers, the U.S. could not achieve its objectives militarily. Instead, Congress equipped its European commissioners with the strongest weapon at its disposal—American purchasing power, the same tactic wielded against Britain before independence—and declared that nations

---

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Congress, *Journal of the House of Representatives*. (Washington, D.C.: Printed by Duff Green, 1829). 21st Cong., 1st sess., 8 December, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> These included France, the United Netherlands, and Sweden with whom the U.S. already had treaties of commerce, as well as England, Hamburg and Saxony, Prussia, Denmark, Russia, Austria, Venice, Rome, Naples, Tuscany, Sardinia, Genoa, Spain, Portugal, and the Barbary States of the Porte, Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis & Morocco. Nations listed in T. Jefferson, *Diaries*, entry for Jan. 4, 1784 (part of the online collection of Congressional papers at the Library of Congress).

<sup>34</sup> M.D. Peterson, “Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783-1793,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 22:4 (Oct. 1965): 590-591.

refusing trade treaties with the United States would face discriminatory tariffs and market restrictions.

Unfortunately, the allure of U.S. consumers did not persuade most European courts. During the Commission's first two years, only Prussia agreed to a treaty based on the model of free trade.<sup>35</sup> U.S. merchants watched in disbelief as markets collapsed rather than expanded. By 1783, American shipping was banned in British West Indian ports effectively eliminating most of the coffee trade. The U.S. could still import British coffee, but only through British merchants and on British vessels.

---

<sup>35</sup> Other nations, such as Morocco and Denmark, opened trade negotiations with the U.S., but never reached a formal agreement. Correspondence from these failed endeavours indicates that even America's three commissioners did not always present a unified front. In 1783, Adams wrote New York Congressman Robert Livingston to complain of Benjamin Franklin's apparent usurpation of commission authority. "Yesterday, at Versailles, the Baron de Walterstoff came to me, and told me...his court had been informed that Mr. Franklin was the minister authorized and empowered by Congress to treat with all powers of Europe, and they had for this reason sent him orders to deliver the project to Mr. Franklin, but he supposed Mr. Franklin would consult his colleagues. The same information, I doubt not, has been given to the court of Portugal and every other court in Europe...and in consequence of it, very probably, propositions have been made or will be made to him from all of them, and he will keep the whole a secret as he can from Mr. Jay, Mr. Laurens, Mr. Dana, and me."

Adams' complaints about Franklin went beyond those of a co-commissioner afraid of losing his share of the diplomatic lime-light. He went on to impugn Franklin's behaviour as subversive to U.S. trade interests: "But my duty to my country obliges me to say that I seriously believe this clandestine manner of smuggling treaties is contrived by European politicians on purpose that Mr. Jay and I may not have an opportunity of suggesting ideas for the preservation of American navigation, transport trade, and nurseries of seamen. But in another point of view it is of equal importance. This method reflects contempt and ridicule on your other ministers. When all Europe sees that a number of your ministers are kept here as a kind of satellites to Mr. Franklin in the affair of peace, but that they are not to be consulted or asked a question, or even permitted to know the important negotiations which are here going on with all Europe, they fall into contempt. It can not be supposed that Congress mean to cast this contempt upon us, because it cannot be supposed they mean to destroy the reputation, character, influence, and usefulness of those to whom in other respects they entrust powers of so much consequence, and therefore I am persuaded that Congress is as much imposed on by it as the courts of Europe are." J. Adams to R. Livingston, August 13, 1783, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, 6 vol. (Washington, D.C., 1889), 6:649-650 (hereafter *RDC*).



Jefferson replaced Jay on the committee in 1784 and immediately recommended that nations with Atlantic colonies become the Commission's first priorities. The decision to focus on European nations with West Indian colonies reduced the number of prospective U.S. allies to a handful. Britain had already declared itself uninterested in negotiating with the U.S., and France had opened its Caribbean colonies as much as it was going to. A series of laws passed between 1784 and 1785 created several free ports—ports which accepted American ships—in France and the French West Indies, but over the next few years, these acts were rescinded one by one until Jefferson complained that France was “as much as the English...enemies of our ships and mariners.”<sup>36</sup>

U.S. diplomats hoped Amsterdam might be more receptive to American interests. Colonial officials in the Dutch colony of St. Eustatius had, after all, been the first government body to recognize North American claims to independence, followed by France and then Holland, and early conversations with Dutch merchants seemed promising.<sup>37</sup> Holland's liberal commercial policies—which allowed American vessels as well as those of other empires into their ports—provided access to coffee from a number of sources, but the real point of contention in the coffee trade turned out to be distribution. Holland shipped to many of the same countries American merchants wanted to go. Dutch authorities agreed to U.S. shipping to its West Indian colonies of St. Eustatia, Curacao, and St. Martin, as well as

---

<sup>36</sup> T. Jefferson to J. Adams, August 7, 1785 in L. Cappon (ed.), *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959), 1:51.

<sup>37</sup> St. Eustatius was the first foreign port to recognize the American flag, which it did in 1776. A. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2000), p. 214. The Province of Holland voted to support the United States as a sovereign nation in March of 1782; other Dutch provinces soon followed suit.

Dutch “colonies upon the continent,” Surinam, Berbice, Demerera, and Essequibo, but limited what Americans could bring to the colonies and what they could take from them—especially coffee and sugar.<sup>38</sup>

Other options were scarce. Denmark imposed fewer considerations, and relations with the Danish West Indies were desirable—at times indispensable—but ultimately insufficient for the purposes of America’s burgeoning coffee industry.<sup>39</sup> The Commission also approached the Portuguese Ambassador about establishing U.S. trade with Brazilian coffee plantations, but was told that Portugal “admitted no nation to the Brazils.”<sup>40</sup> North American thirst would only be slaked by Brazilian coffee after the colony freed itself from Portugal.

In the meantime, Britain’s arch-enemy, France, would do nicely. Frustrated, as 1785 drew to a close, America’s European Commissioners found themselves haggling with places like Austria that offered no prospects of Atlantic-based profits prompting Jefferson and his colleagues to promote yet a third iteration of treaty revisions in early 1786.<sup>41</sup> This version did away

---

<sup>38</sup> J. Adams to Livingston, July 23, 1783 and July 31, 1783, *Ibid.*, 2:623. The initial 1778 U.S. draft treaty with Holland did not include commodity specific restrictions on imports and exports; these were added at Holland’s insistence. Holland maintained an absolute monopoly on all sugar refining from Dutch colonies, and considered the increasing number of sugar refineries in North America—several in Philadelphia—as a threat to Dutch control of the industry. Between 1770 and 1785, Philadelphia opened two sugar refineries; in addition to the two operating before the American Revolution, these represented a significant increase in the city’s sugar manufacturing capabilities. Number of sugar refineries compared in *Constables Returns for 1775* and *Prospect of Philadelphia* (1795), one of Philadelphia’s earliest published business directories.

<sup>39</sup> An example of this “indispensability,” is U.S. use of St. Croix for neutral re-shipping between 1781 and 1783, recorded in the Records of the Philadelphia Custom House, Records Group 36, Inward and Outward Entry Volumes. 1781-1787.

<sup>40</sup> Peterson, “Jefferson and Commercial Policy,” 593. See also, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651-1827, “United States Treaties, 1786, Amity and Commerce Treaty between Portugal and the United States,” in the collections of Library of Congress (hereafter TJP)

<sup>41</sup> “Our instructions are clearly to treat. But these made part of a system, wise and advantageous if executed in its parts, but which has hitherto failed in its most material

entirely with the notion of multiple trade partners, and focused instead on France. To his critics, Jefferson only shifted American commercial dependence from Britain to France but Jefferson chose to focus on other aspects of the arrangement.<sup>42</sup> A treaty with France aligned the U.S. with the only military force able to challenge Britain. “It will be a strong link of connection,” Jefferson wrote, “the more [so] with the only nation on earth on whom we can solidly rely for assistance till we stand on our own legs.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the Parisian connection gave U.S. importers access to the French Caribbean colonies, especially Saint Domingue, the leading producer of sugars and coffee in the Caribbean since the early (sugar) and mid (coffee) eighteenth century.

American merchants rallied behind Jefferson’s plan and in October 1786 France agreed to a series of trade concessions, including the use of U.S. ships and lowered tariffs in both France and the French Antilles.<sup>44</sup> The resulting shift to French coffee suppliers is obvious in Table 2. America’s re-export future looked brighter still with the outbreak of war between Britain and France early in 1793. The United States stood to profit from Europe’s

---

branch, that of connection with the powers having American territory.” T. Jefferson to J. Jay, Jan. 27, 1786, in Boyd, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 9:235.

<sup>42</sup> R. King to J. Jackson, June 11, 1786, *LDC*, 23:353.

<sup>43</sup> T. Jefferson to R. Izard, Nov. 18, 1796, in Boyd, *Papers of Jefferson*, 10:541-42.

<sup>44</sup> C. Alexandre de Calonne to T. Jefferson, Oct. 22, 1796, *TJP*, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651-1827. The letter “promises to diminish the droits du soi et d’aminante, payable by an American vessel entering into a port of France and to reduce what should remain into a single duty...it is certainly desirable that these duties be reduced to a single one.” Jefferson wrote de Calonne in response, “their names and number perplex and harass the merchant more than the amount.” T. Jefferson, Observations on Charles Alexandre de Calonne’s Letter of October 22, 1786, on Trade between the United States and France (October 22, 1796), *TJP*, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651-1827.

French imports of U.S. domestic exports also climbed steadily during the 1780s, though American imports from France continued to lag, by 1791 favouring the U.S. almost five or six to one. Peterson, “Jefferson and Commercial Policy,” 599; and J. F. Stover, “French-American Trade during the Confederation, 1781-1789,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 35 (1958): 399-414.

hostilities in two ways. Combatants needed what Americans could supply, including wheat and other food, and—since ships flying the colours of warring countries risked attack—they needed the services of neutral shippers. The French Council removed all remaining barriers and restrictions on U.S. trade in the West Indies in February 1793, fulfilling a decade-long objective in American foreign policy.<sup>45</sup> Spain followed suit four years later.

Table 2: U.S. Coffee Imports from the West Indies, 1790-1791

Region	Coffee (pounds)	% of Total U.S. Coffee Imports
French West Indies	3,432,385	77%
Dutch West Indies	559,613	13
British West Indies	346,875	7
Spanish West Indies	51,689	1
Danish West Indies	28,715	.7
East Indies	25,138	.6
Swedish West Indies	8,895	.1
Portuguese West Indies	1,108	>.01
West Indies (General)	8,472	.1
Other	15,783	.4
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>4,478,676</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1832-1861), "Foreign Relations," 1:195.

Britain still excluded the U.S. from its Caribbean colonies, but war in Europe undermined the Royal Navy's ability to patrol the region and American ships had much greater freedom of movement.<sup>46</sup> The best the

<sup>45</sup> Peterson, "Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy," 608.

<sup>46</sup> Mayo (ed.), "Instructions to the British Ministers," 35.

British Navy could do was stop American vessels suspected of privateering or smuggling and confiscate their cargos in British ports.<sup>47</sup> This they did often enough that President Washington sent a special commission headed by John Jay to Britain in 1794 to negotiate a truce. Instead, the Jay Treaty, intended to encourage American commerce with the British Caribbean, backfired and rigidified what had already become U.S. merchant's common practice of looking elsewhere. U.S. neutrality was more than a diplomatic objective;

---

<sup>47</sup>The result was a 27 per cent decline in exports to the French islands in 1794, though trade levels re-established the following year.

Table 3: U.S. Coffee Imports by Region, 1794-1806

Year	Swedish West Indies	Danish West Indies	Dutch West Indies	British West Indies	French West Indies	Spanish West Indies	Other	TOTAL
<b>1794-95</b>	329,342	428,596	2,586,783	5,001,930	43,464,561	492,817	1,656,947	53,960,976
<b>1795-96</b>	314,140	961,706	7,751,433	4,480,463	44,688,310	681,986	2,262,457	61,141,051
<b>1796-97</b>	392,551	943,880	3,783,313	1,695,665	37,164,707	867,768	4,643,618	49,491,502
<b>1797-98</b>	13,782	109,027	3,863,472	1,372,603	42,290,705	1,109,558	8,963,478	57,722,625
<b>1798-99</b>	175,213	2,033,108	10,345,612	778,571	4,918,422	3,919,287	7,817,357	29,978,570
<b>1799-1800</b>	101,604	605,304	3,862,539	805,041	26,055,184	2,918,108	13,042,165	47,389,946
<b>1800-01</b>	97,254	1,631,963	1,993,444	1,188,795	37,975,598	680,103	13,816,747	57,383,904
<b>1801-02</b>	53,496	200,594	1,388,881	1,764,391	25,870,126	591,445	11,017,928	40,886,861
<b>1802-03</b>	327,384	417,034	723,501	1,899,734	8,658,088	452,349	4,350,403	16,828,493
<b>1803-04</b>	698,469	2,116,340	7,979,593	1,997,162	19,605,955	4,239,074	12,001,789	48,638,382
<b>1804-05</b>	273,442	2,390,745	992,853	289,206	27,453,284	5,411,664	18,048,130	56,141,320
<b>1805-06</b>	66,833	3,585,073	2,218,818	1,440,658	29,679,201	5,102,115	13,878,954	55,993,788

**Source:** In pounds; *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1832-1861), "Commerce and Navigation," Vol. V.

it had been essential to the nation's future prosperity since the first overtures of the European Commission. "The consumption of coffee, sugar, and other West India productions increases fast in the north of Europe," far-sighted Silas Deane correctly told Congress in August 1776.<sup>48</sup> Without trade agreements America could not conduct their budding business with the lucrative colonies of the Caribbean, and without neutral shipping they were unable to bring tropical produce to their consumers—at a time when war between Britain and France provided prime opportunities to enter European markets.<sup>49</sup> The decision to specialize in re-exported tropical goods let American merchants capitalize on their geographic proximity to places of production in the Atlantic region and utilize the strength of their growing shipping fleet to reach new consumers through the avenues that inter-European warfare provided. As one savvy trader noted, it accrued "all of the benefits of colonization without the administration and expense."<sup>50</sup> The re-export trade—with coffee as its flagship product—had become essential to the national economy and political advocates portrayed re-export merchants as "patriots" whose trade was "a necessary link in the chain of

---

<sup>48</sup> Deane to the Committee of Secret Correspondence, undated, *RDC*, 2:118.

<sup>49</sup> Britain's response to U.S. reconciliation with France took a different tack four years later; rather than sanctions, Parliament passed "An act for carrying into execution the treaty of amity, commerce, and navigation, concluded between his Majesty and the United States of America." Not only did this act reinforce U.S. rights to trade with both the West and East Indies tax free, but it authorized the use of American ships representing the largest British trade concession since independence. *ASPFR*, 2:103-106, "An Act for Carrying into Execution the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, concluded between his Majesty and the United States of America" permitted the U.S. to export American products to Britain and her colonies. The act eliminated all import duties in both West and East Indian possessions, and especially encouraged lumber, grains, beef and pork, fish, tobacco and rice: "...that the vessels belonging to the citizens of the United States of America shall be admitted and hospitably received in all seaports and harbours of the British territories in the East Indies." It also allowed U.S. merchants to ship British colonial produce in American vessels without export taxes, the first time this level of open trade had been permitted since U.S. independence. This applied, however, only to U.S. ships carrying British commodities to America or to other British territories; those intended for other nations were still taxed. Many of these same issues were revisited and formalized six years later in the Jay Treaty. For discussions of the Jay Treaty and reactions to U.S. shipping to French and British colonies see A. Clauder, *American Commerce as Affected by the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1793-1812* (Philadelphia, 1932) and W. Coatsworth, "American Trade with European Colonies," 243-266.

<sup>50</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 26, 1789.

our society and of our place in the world.”<sup>51</sup> Coffee re-exporting, like coffee drinking for those few years in 1770s, had become a patriotic act.

### **Coffee and Slavery**

Slavery poses the biggest challenge to coffee’s connection with American freedom. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Caribbean and Latin American slaves produced most of the coffee Americans drank and even East Indian coffee labourers, while not technically enslaved, could hardly be called free. At times, the relationship was even more direct—some coffee importers traded in slaves as well. Both British and American emancipationists recognized the powerful cultural connections between commodities and the labour that produced them in their boycotts of slave-produced sugar, but no similar embargo of coffee occurred.<sup>52</sup> By 1800, the cost of a coffee embargo for America would have been too high. The new nation made more from the re-export of coffee overseas than from re-exports of tea, sugar, and molasses combined; coffee represented ten per cent of all U.S. trade income and twenty-

---

<sup>51</sup> Philadelphia re-export trade merchants were described as acting “from motives of patriotism as well as gain, he combines his own interests with that of his country...adding to the revenue and riches of his country...searching [out] a market for the productions of the farmers...[and] discovering something that may contribute to their convenience and comfort.” A. Gregg, *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 543, cited in B. Schoen, “Calculating the Price of Union: Republican Economic Nationalism and the Origins of Southern Sectionalism, 1790-1828,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23:2 (Summer 2003), 184. Schoen argues that advances in American re-exports to Europe came at a cost. Not all regions of the U.S. benefit equally from this branch of trade, which was concentrated in the Mid-Atlantic. Southern states continued to struggle for a market for their agricultural products, and often felt at odds with Congressional policies designed to protect U.S. maritime activities.

<sup>52</sup> For an eloquent discussion of the British boycott of Caribbean sugar by emancipationists see: A. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains. Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves*(Boston: 2005), pp. 192-196. Also see S. Mintz, “*Food, Culture and Energy*” and W.G. Clarence-Smith “The Global Consumption of Hot Beverages, c 1500 to c1880” in *Food and Globalisation* , edited by Alexander Nützenadel and Frank Trentmann, (Oxford and NY:, forthcoming) both point out how exceptional the boycott of slave-grown sugar was. Few other slave grown commodities such as tobacco and cotton were stigmatized by their use of slave labour.



five per cent of its re-export income—high figures for a commodity that North America did not produce itself.<sup>53</sup>

Yemen monopolized world coffee production until Dutch cultivation began in Java at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>54</sup> Slave labour entered the still small world coffee market only in 1718 with the first Atlantic experiments in Dutch Surinam, but thereafter coffee planters, slaves, and cultivation techniques rapidly crossed imperial boundaries until almost all European empires in the west—British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch—boasted important coffee export economies. Some 2.6 million Africans came to populate the small islands that dotted the Caribbean ocean constituting the majority of the population in most colonies where they suffered very short and cruel lives.<sup>55</sup> The number of slaves working coffee farms varied by colony; coffee trees dominated the landscape of some colonies, like Dominica, grew on the fringes of sugar-driven economies such as Grenada, Martinique, and St. Lucia, and filled the mountainous interiors of Saint Domingue, Jamaica and, later, Puerto Rico and Cuba. By the middle of the nineteenth century, coffee plantations in Brazil

---

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Revenue fro Commodity Re-Exports, 1802-1804

Re-exported Commodity	Value of Re-Exported Article
Merchandize paying ad valorem duties	\$9,772,000
Coffee	7,302,000
Sugar	5,775,000
Cotton, cocoa, indigo, pimento, and pepper	2,490,000
Teas	1,304,000
Wines	1,108,000
Spirits of every description	642,000
All other articles	140,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$28,533,000</b>

**Source:** American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, 38 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1832-1861), "Commerce and Navigation." V: 642.

<sup>54</sup> B. Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeeshouse* (New Haven, 2005), pp. 55-77.

<sup>55</sup> Thurber, *Coffee*, p. 19.

reached new economies of scale and profitability that first rivalled—then passed—those of sugar estates from the century before.<sup>56</sup>

Most early coffee farms, however, were small operations. One contemporary source estimated as few as 250 acres and “a few slaves” could produce coffee profitably, and though coffee planters undoubtedly had higher aspirations, most owned fewer than fifty slaves throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>57</sup> Smaller start-up costs in land and labour made coffee planting accessible to a socially and economically diverse group of people. Unlike the

---

<sup>56</sup> But while coffee’s spectacular rise in the nineteenth century is well documented in Latin American scholarship, its arrival and early relationship to North America’s economy has received less attention. The pioneering study of coffee growing in the Caribbean is M.R. Trouillot, “Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth Century Saint-Domingue” *Review* 3 (Winter 1982): 331-388. Others writing about Caribbean coffee cultivation include: K. Monteith and V. Shepherd, “Pen-Keepers and Coffee Farmers in a Sugar-Plantation Society,” in V. Shepherd (ed.), *Slavery without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (Gainesville, 2003); K. Monteith, “Planting and Processing Techniques on Jamaican Coffee Plantations During Slavery,” in V. Shepherd (ed.), *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (Kingston, 2002); “The Labour Regimen on Coffee Plantations during Slavery,” in K. Monteith and G. Richards (eds.), *Jamaica in Slavery and Freedom: History, Heritage, and Culture* (Kingston, 2002); and “Emancipation and Labour on Jamaican Coffee Plantations, 1838-1848,” *Slavery and Abolition* 21:3 (December 2000): 125-135; J. Delle, *An Archeology of Social Space: Analyzing Coffee Plantations in Jamaica’s Blue Mountains* (New York, 1998); D. Geggus, “Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue and the Shaping of the Slave Labor Force,” and M.R. Trouillot, “Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves in the Antilles: The Impact of a Secondary Crop,” both in I. Berlin and P. Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, 1993); B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore, 1984) and *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807-1834* (Cambridge, 1976). It is striking that when F. Ortiz wrote his path-breaking study of Cuba: *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar* (NY: 1947) coffee was hardly to be seen even though Cuba in 1909 had the second highest per capita consumption of coffee in the world according to *The Tea and Coffee Trade Journal*(September, 1916): 232.

<sup>57</sup> Wimpffen, *A Voyage to Santo Domingo*, 319-320. Of the 250 acres, Wimpffen allocated fifty acres for meadows and buildings, fifty for provisions, and another fifty as unusable given the variation of mountain terrain, leaving only one hundred feet for the cultivation of coffee trees. Edgar Corrie offers similar figures in his *Letters on the Subject of the Duties of Coffee* (London, 1808), 8, in which he estimates that coffee planters could begin a profitable business with as few as ten to twenty slaves and two hundred acres of land. See also: Geggus, “Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue,” 76; Trouillot, “Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves,” 131; Trouillot, “Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue,” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 5 (1982): 346-48; Geggus, “Sugar and Coffee Cultivation in Saint Domingue,” 74-77; and Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, 434.

great sugar planters, many of whom left management of their Caribbean estates to attorneys and bookkeepers and lived in London or Paris, coffee planters often lived in residence. Their letters offer one perspective of coffee slaves' experiences in the remote, highland areas where coffee grew best, and stand in stark juxtaposition to American associations of coffee with freedom.<sup>58</sup> "The negroes in my district never went abroad," wrote Pierre Joseph Laborie, a refugee Saint Domingue coffee planter operating a large coffee plantation in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, "I brought from the Cape all the articles which my negroes desired."<sup>59</sup> Only the handful of mule drivers responsible for bringing coffee to market regularly left Laborie's plantation. Small coffee farmers used similar tactics, though in the case of Matthew Smith, who lived near the Jamaican port of Savannah la Mar, slaves replaced mules as beasts of burden. When British port officials complained that Smith's coffee bags were underweight—colonial law mandated that coffee be shipped in bags of 112 pounds while Smith's weighed between 72 and 79 pounds—he replied that he had no mules or horses and 79 pounds was "as much as a Negro can carry upon his head."<sup>60</sup>

Were everyday Americans aware of how their coffee was produced? Travel narratives make it likely; the popular literary genre of eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries included several accounts of coffee plantations, but no public backlash occurred.<sup>61</sup> A few writers noted with irony the duplicity of abolitionists' boycotts of slave-produced sugar while consumption of other slave

---

<sup>58</sup> R. Dunn, among others, has documented the high absentee rate of West Indian sugar plantation owners in *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, 1972), pp. 10-103, 142-143, 161-163, 200-201, 213-222.

<sup>59</sup> P.J. Laborie, *The Coffee Planter of Saint Domingo: With an Appendix Containing a View of the Constitution, Government, Laws, and Statutes of that Colony prior to the Year 1789* (London, 1797), p. 178-179.

<sup>60</sup> NA/T 1/484/323a-b and 324. Memorial of Stephen Fuller, Esq., Agent of Jamaica, 1770; NA/T1/484/325a-b Letter from Jno. Morse to Stephen Fuller Esq., Agent for Jamaica, 1770.

<sup>61</sup> R. Bisset's two-volume history of the slave trade, for instance, popular in London and America, confirms Laborie's account of coffee slaves' isolation. R. Bisset, *The history of the Negro slave trade, in its connection with the commerce and prosperity of the West Indies, and the wealth and power of the British Empire* 2 vols. (London, 1805), 1: 392.

products continued apace. “Oh, they say, do not use the polluted thing; beware of sweetening your coffee with slave-grown sugar,” wrote Reverend Robert Burns, a member of Glasgow Young Man’s Free Trade Association. But how could “slave-grown tobacco, cotton, and coffee” be acceptable, he reasoned, “while slave-grown sugar must be productive of moral disease?”<sup>62</sup> Most writers, however, remained silent. In fact, public reaction to the incongruity of coffee’s connotations of freedom and its origins in slavery remained largely unexplored in public debate before 1848 when protests came—not from socially conscious American consumers—but from disgruntled British planters, who, forced to use non-slave labour since Britain’s abolition of slavery in 1838, protested the prospect of competing for the American market with slave-produced coffee from Brazil.<sup>63</sup> American reactions, however, remained bland; a 1859 *New York Times* article only noted that coffee, along with some other tropical goods, were “necessaries of life” for the “northern latitudes which embrace the largest civilized portions of the human race;” all traces of its un-free origins had been erased.<sup>64</sup> Ironically for the protesting British planters, one of the fastest growing British colonial coffee-consumer markets was the former labour force that had produced it. Edward Bean Underhill noted in his 1862 account of the West Indies that “the vast increase in the use of these articles [sugar and coffee] is the result of freedom...With such an internal demand, it is not wonder that coffee cultivation is growing into favour among the negroes.”<sup>65</sup>

In reality, French rather than British Caribbean colonies had supplied most of America’s coffee needs for decades by the time Underhill wrote his report. In French Saint Domingue, the principal exporter of coffee to the U.S. until 1803,

---

<sup>62</sup> R. Burns, *Restrictive Laws on Food and Trade tried by the Test of Christianity: A Lecture Delivered...December 6, 1843* (Glasgow, 1848), pp. 8-9.

<sup>63</sup> Several publications record the international debate of slave vs. free coffee. See: R. Paterson, *Remarks on the Depressed State of Cultivation in the West India Colonies* (Edinburgh, 1848), p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> *New York Times* Nov 10, 1858, p.4.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Bean Underhill, *The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition*, p. 333.

“gens de couleur,” (free people of colour) dominated the colony’s coffee industry, owning one-third of the plantation property and one-quarter of the slaves in Saint Domingue in 1789.<sup>66</sup> Saint Domingue’s place in American commerce ended, however, when Toussaint l’Ouveture led the revolutionary forces against French colonial troops. St. Domingue, renamed Haiti, became the second European colony in the Americas to gain independence and the first to abolish slavery. Rather than applaud this double freedom, the United States government refused to recognize Haiti’s independence or to send an ambassador to the new nation until 1862.<sup>67</sup> America’s domestic north-south sectional conflict shaped its international commercial and diplomatic policy, leading the federal government to encourage coffee importation from slave-rich Brazil rather than from emancipated and free Haiti.

### **Coffee Becomes Americanized**

Eighteenth-century tea boycotts whet North American appetite for coffee, but did not guarantee that the U.S. would become known as a nation of coffee drinkers. Although colonists briefly abandoned tea drinking, they soon returned. In 1859, the U.S. imported more than 29 million pounds of tea which rose to 47 million in 1870 and 81 million in 1881. That was more than a pound per capita. True, Americans imported 455 million pounds of coffee in 1881, but tea imports had been growing rather than shrinking, and traders assumed that four times as much coffee grounds as tea leaves were needed to produce the same amount of

---

<sup>66</sup> Trouillot, “Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue,” *Review* 3 (Winter 1982): 349-354; C. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, 1990), p.19; Trouillot, “Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves in the Antilles: The Impact of a Secondary Crop,” p. 127.

<sup>67</sup> The Haitian Revolution had received the attention it deserves at last. See, for example, L. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge, MA: 2004) and *A Colony of Citizens* (Chapel Hill, NC: 2004), M.R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past, Power and the Production of History* (Boston: 1995).

beverage.<sup>68</sup> Since coffee imports were 5.5 times tea imports, the amount of coffee and tea brewed and presumably consumed was quite similar.

Independent Americans drank far more tea than had colonial Americans. Only in 1890 did nationalists regularly proclaim coffee “the national beverage” of the United States.<sup>69</sup> The U.S. had set aside tea definitively and become a “coffee-loving country”.<sup>70</sup> So if the true divide in the hot beverage war was well after independence, what explains coffee’s triumph once the Boston Tea Party is dismissed as a cause?

For international merchants, the issue had been how much coffee and tea Americans imported, not how much they drank; here coffee towered over tea. The U.S. imported one-third of the world’s coffee in the 1880s as annual per capita consumption ballooned from well under one pound at independence to nine pounds by 1882. Factoring in population increases from under 4 million to 50 million during that century, total coffee consumption increased over one hundred fold. The import price of coffee in the U.S. during the nineteenth century averaged about one-half of what it had been in Brazil’s independence in 1821. By 1906, when Brazil exported almost 90 per cent of the world’s coffee in terms of volume, the price had fallen to one-third of the 1821 price.<sup>71</sup> Supply-driven demand meant that per capita consumption continued to grow until 1902 when it reached 13.3 pounds. After 1870, coffee grew at the expense of tea since per capita tea consumption declined almost 40 per cent between 1870 and 1900 while coffee consumption grew by over 50 per cent.<sup>72</sup> The primary reason for coffee’s vigorous growth was Brazil’s ability to increase production without increasing price; the “forest rent” of vast, fertile little-cultivated lands yielded historic coffee crops once put to the plow.

---

<sup>68</sup> F. Thurber, *Coffee, from Plantation to Cup* (NY: 1886), pp. 205-206.

<sup>69</sup> The *American Grocer* cited in the leading coffee trade journal, *The Spice Mill*, July, 1891: 172.

<sup>70</sup> *The Spice Mill*, February, 1890: 37.

<sup>71</sup> Marcellino Martins and E. Johnston, *150 Anos de Café* (Rio: 1992), p. 335.

<sup>72</sup> Calculated from Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p.521.

Table 4: Share of World Coffee Exports and Imports, 1850-1900 (5 year averages)

<u>Years</u>	<u>Exports</u>		<u>Imports</u>	
	Brazil's Share %	US Share %	Europe Share	U.S. p/c consumption lbs. <sup>73</sup>
1800	0%	1.0%	93%	
1851-55		28.2	65	
1856-60	53.0	32.2	61	
1861-65	494.4	17.5	75	
1866-70	47.8	24.9	69	5.01
1871-75	50.1	31.2	62	6.86
1876-80	47.6	34.7	58	6.93
1881-85	51.8	37.6	55	8.63
1886-90	56.8	38.1	48	8.62
1891-95	57.1	46.8	45	8.31
1896-00	62.4	31.9	60	9.93

**Sources:** Edmar Bacha and Robert Greenhill, *150 Anos de Café*, (Rio de Janeiro:1992) passim. For columns 1,2, and 3, Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p. 529 for column 4.

By 1900, America was the world's greatest coffee market, and coffee the third most important internationally traded commodity. Caribbean trading had created the necessary preconditions to spread and deepen the coffee drinking habit, but the monumental and unprecedented expansion of American coffee drinking in the nineteenth century depended on two additional developments: the drink had to be Americanized, and it had to become a mass beverage. Interestingly, both needs were met by forces outside America. First, Brazil gained its independence and opened up the largest coffee plantations the world had seen; then Northern European immigration brought millions of northern Europeans to the United States, particularly Germans and then Scandinavians predisposed to drinking coffee. The two might have simply been coincidental, but

---

<sup>73</sup> In pounds per capita, five year average from Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p. 529.

the availability of inexpensive coffee—and sugar—probably sweetened the prospects of emigrating to the United States rather than Canada or South American or remaining in Europe. But though Latin American suppliers and western European consumers were key components of coffee’s diffusion in American culture, they were almost invisible in how the U.S. coffee industry marketed itself to its ever-growing consumer base.

The refashioning of foreign-produced goods into American products appealed to an increasingly vocal constituency who lamented what they considered the dangerous trend of U.S. investment in re-exported commodities. “Independence has been the theme,” wrote newspaper editorialist James Tilton as early as 1819, “from the days of 1776 to this time.” During the Revolution, political independence, “as it was emphatically styled, was the rage, from Georgia to Maine,” he noted, “and yet strange to tell, few or more of us think of *eating and drinking independently*. Is it not a thousand times more ridiculous to send to the West Indies for breakfast or supper” because of our “inhabitants of cities and towns...obstinate adherence to tea, coffee, &c.?”<sup>74</sup> If people like Tilton were buying coffee it would have been best to deemphasize its foreign origins, an easier strategy after the Louisiana Purchase when some entrepreneurial marketers promoted “New Orleans” coffee as a “national” American alternative, hoping buyers would not realize that New Orleans was the port of coffee importation rather than coffee producer.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, the only effort to grow coffee in continental North America failed before it even got started. Eighty-eight men and women from Pennsylvania and New Jersey under the leadership of Saint Domingue émigré Peter Stephen Chazotte petitioned the Public Lands Committee of Congress in 1822 for 24,000 acres of government land on Monroe’s Pesque Isle—one of a string of islands off Florida’s southern coast more popularly called Key Largo. They called

---

<sup>74</sup> J. Tilton, “Variety and Observations,” *The American Journal*, Oct. 16, 1819.

<sup>75</sup> J. T. Magill, “New Orleans’ Coffee Connection,” *Louisiana Cultural Vistas* (Fall 2005): 45-55.



themselves the East Florida Coffee Land Association and hoped to grow sugar and cocoa, but especially coffee.<sup>76</sup> In addition to profit, the petitioners cited “patriotism” and “enterprising citizenship” as incentives for their venture. Even if Congress had approved the plan, it was doomed—Key Largo, like New Orleans, was too close to sea level to successfully cultivate coffee—but the petition was denied on grounds that public land grants were limited to under \$5,000 (far below the Association’s request for 24,000 acres at \$1.25 per acre). Congress did, however, acknowledge the benefits of a domestic coffee industry, applauding the petitioners’ “intelligence and ability” and “expanded and liberal views of national patriotism” in promoting these “experiments for introducing these valuable productions.”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> No. 353, “Application of the ‘Coffee Land Association’ for a Grant of 24,000 Acres in Florida, at the Minimum Price,” *Records of the Committee of Public Lands, 1816-1921*, 17<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration: Washington, D.C.), pp. 457-467. See also: P. Stephen Chazotte to J. Madison, January 15, 1821, James Madison Papers, General Correspondence, Series 1: Microfilm Reel 19, Library of Congress. Madison responded two weeks later, thanking Chazotte for the articles about coffee production and agreeing that “Experiments for introducing these valuable productions are strongly recommended by the success which attended the culture of rice and cotton, the importances of which was at one time as little understood as that of the article whose merits you discuss.” J. Madison to P. Chazotte, Jan. 30, 1821, James Madison Papers. Chazotte (1770-1849) migrated to Philadelphia from Saint Domingue; in addition to his agricultural interests, he published a textbook for learning French, a treatise on banking, and two histories of the Haitian Revolution. P. Chazotte, [\*An Essay on the Best Method of Teaching Foreign Languages as Applied with Extraordinary Success to the French Languages\*](#) (Philadelphia, 1817); *A New System of Banking Developed and Exemplified, in a New Scheme to Establish a Merchants Bank of General Deposits : and also, in a Scheme to Establish a Grand National Bank* (Philadelphia, 1815); *Historical Sketches of the Revolutions and the Foreign and Civil Wars in the Island of St. Domingo, with a Narrative of the Entire Massacre of the White Population of the Island* (New York, 1840, republished 1975); *The Black Rebellion in Haiti; The Experience of One who was Present during Four Years of Tumult and Massacre* (Philadelphia, 1869, reprinted 1927).

<sup>77</sup> “Application of the ‘Coffee Land Association’,” p. 457. In 1898, America finally acquired coffee production capabilities through the annexation of Puerto Rico and Hawaii.

## They Have a Lot of Coffee in Brazil

Neither Key Largo nor small West Indian islands could hope to meet America's swelling demand, but Brazil had both ample land and slave labour.<sup>78</sup> Coffee arrived in Rio de Janeiro in the 1760s via French Guyana and Para'. The *arabica* came, not from export merchants, but through Portuguese officials and religious orders, especially the Capuchins, the Bishop of Rio de Janeiro, and French and Dutch immigrants, and was originally planted beside other experimental crops like ginger and pepper in small orchards.<sup>79</sup>

Coffee, as an export product, was not an inevitable development in Brazil.<sup>80</sup> Some economists estimate that 80 per cent of all coffee exported in Brazil's 322 year-long-colonial period shipped between 1810 and independence in 1822, reflecting its minor role in the colonial period. This changed only after Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Portugal in 1808 forcing the prince-regent, Dom João VI, to conduct the largest trans-oceanic migration of an imperial capital in history.<sup>81</sup> In Rio de Janeiro, some newly arrived aristocrats and merchants, stripped of their traditional sources of income, turned to tropical agriculture and managed to send their first cargo of coffee to Boston that same year.<sup>82</sup> Though Dom João had tea,

---

<sup>78</sup> Studies of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization after World War II found no relationship between degree of coffee productivity and size of farm in Brazil, in V. Stolcke, *Cafeicultura. Homens, Mulheres e Capital (1850-1980)*, trans. D. Bottmann and João Martins Filho (SP: Editora Brasiliense, 1986), p. 189. M. Nolasco in *Café y sociedad en México* (Mexico D.F.: Centro de Ecodesarrollo, 1985), p. 42 has a similar finding for Mexico. S. Stein, *Vassouras, a Brazilian Coffee Municipio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 12.

<sup>79</sup> A. de E. Taunay, *História do Café no Brasil* vol. 2, tomo 2 (Rio: Departamento Nacional de Café, 1939) discusses coffee in the colonial era. Also see: B. de Magalhães, *O Café nah História, no Folclore, e nas Belas-Artes* (São Paulo: Cia. Editora Nacional, 1939).

<sup>80</sup> Whereas Haiti after 75 years of cultivation reached a yearly export total of 80 million pounds, Brazil in 1830, some ninety years after coffee's first introduction, only exported 14 million pounds. In that same year of 1820 Cuba, benefiting from the flight of Haitian planters with their slaves, was exporting some 25 million pounds. Thurber, *Coffee from Plantation to Cup* (NY: Trow's, 1881), p. 125.

<sup>81</sup> N.P. Macdonald, *The Making of Brazil, Portuguese Roots, 1500-1822* (Sussex Eng.: The Book Guild Ltd., 1996), p. 358.

<sup>82</sup> Ironically, the first successful private coffee planters seem to have been Dutch and French, some of the latter apparently originally from Saint Domingue, rather than Portuguese. D. Gomes, *Antigos Cafés do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio: Livraria Kosmos Editora, 1989), pp. 18-20.

not coffee, planted in the royal Botanical Garden he ordered built, coffee was quickly more successful. Independence, first of the United States, then of Haiti opened a new market to Brazil. Political liberty, ironically also led to a flood of African slaves.

Relations between the U.S. and Brazil grew stronger still after American merchants and shippers supplanted the British in the Atlantic slave trade, integrating Brazil and Africa into a U.S.-based triangular trade after Brazilian independence in 1822. A spurt in commercial relations between newly free Brazil and recently freed United States was based mostly on the flourishing slave trade. Brazil had long been the world's leading importer of African slaves, first via the Portuguese, then Dutch, Angolan, Brazilian and British slavers. American slavers, forbidden from importing into the United States after 1808, benefited from anti-slavery campaigns which hindered British competition. North American merchantmen carried some of the greatest annual slave importations Brazil had known—until the Atlantic slave trade was terminated by the British navy in 1850. The role of the U.S. merchant marine in the Brazil trade, and in the Atlantic in general, declined with the prohibition of the Atlantic slave trade. American investors turned to the home market and developed its west as railroads reached ever further towards the Pacific. But American's reorientation from the Atlantic to the western frontier did not thwart their budding romance with coffee. Brazil's coffee exports jumped 75 fold by volume between independence in 1822 and 1899 as Brazilians responded to—and stimulated—new opportunities and British bottoms took the place of Yankee traders. British moralists who subdued the lucrative trans-oceanic commerce in humans in the first part of the 1800s were not able to convince their countrymen to forego profiting from a slave-grown crop, a crop which was much larger after 1850 than before. Coffee exports, three-quarters of which went to the United States, constituted over 40 per cent of Brazil's exports after 1830, eclipsing

sugar.<sup>83</sup> The growing capitalist economy of the United States gave rise to scores of “coffee barons” and slave baronies in Brazil.

Brazil’s ability to escalate coffee production without increasing retail prices explains part of the American fascination with the bean, but immigration to the U.S. of millions of northern Europeans predisposed to buy coffee was important as well. Settlers from what is today Germany started arriving in the British North American colonies in 1683, around the time that immigrants from other northern European areas began trickling in. Although not a majority, they constituted a large share in states such as Pennsylvania and New York, the two leading coffee ports in the eighteenth century and later Illinois and Minnesota. The 1830s and 1840s were key years for German immigration. Data for coffee consumption by ethnicity does not exist. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that they played a role disproportionate to their 15-20 per cent share of the total U.S. population.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century taxation policies in Germany put coffee beyond the reach of most of the population, but desire for the commodity is evident in the number of coffee substitutes that developed.<sup>84</sup> Germans and other northern Europeans were influenced in part by their cold climate and in part by a desire to emulate the coffee-drinking aristocracy and bourgeoisie (some of whom were in turn imitating French cafe society). But what Jan de Vries has called the “industrious revolution” with longer days, urbanization, and more work outside the house also contributed to the urge for caffeine.<sup>85</sup> By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Germany was the second largest importer of coffee behind the

---

<sup>83</sup> Bacha and Greenhill, *150 anos de café*, p. 355.

<sup>84</sup> German taste for coffee is attested to by studies of eighteenth and nineteenth century European coffee consumption by Ulla Heise, Heinrich Jacob, Roman Sandgruber, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch.. U. Heise, *Kaffee und Kaffeehaus, Eine Kulturgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1987); H.E. Jacob, *Sage und Siegeszug des Kaffees. Die Biographie eines Weltwirtschaftlichen Stoffes* (Hamburg: 1952); R. Sandgruber, *Die Anfänge der Konsumgesellschaft* (Vienna: 1982); W. Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise. A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* (NY: 1992).

<sup>85</sup> Jan de Vries, “Purchasing Power and the World of Goods” in *Consumption and the World of Goods* edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: 1993), pp. 95, 107, 115.

United States. In absolute figures, it was the leading European importer, though still behind the Scandinavian countries, Belgium and the Netherlands in per capita terms.<sup>86</sup> At the middle of the nineteenth century German desire for coffee probably led many poor immigrants to think that an important part of “making America” was the simple luxury of occasionally drinking coffee.

## **Conclusion**

Coffee is clearly an important commodity in American historical and social development, but one whose nature and cultural connotations should be reconsidered. Coffee was a democratic drink insofar as consumption was widely disseminated in the U.S., but its tie to liberty and equality are tenuous if not hypocritical when provenance is taken into account. The patriotic American drink came via Caribbean and Latin American slavocratic colonies. Though it contributed to the independence of Brazil’s government, it also perpetuated that society’s dependence on slavery until 1888. American purveyors erased coffee’s janus face by recasting the commodity as an all-American consumable, and American consumers likewise paid little attention to the labour form that brought them their morning wake-up call. By 1844, the “literary men about town, and strangers of distinction,” wrote one society columnist, “discuss the latest topics of the world and day” over “the fumes of coffee, and a slice of French rolls.” The news and food still had international cachet, but coffee had become thoroughly domesticated.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Thurber, p. 241, in *Coffee* shows Hamburg’s imports to be second to the U.S. in 1877. M. Samper and R. Fernando in *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America 1500-1989* (NY: 2003), pp. 443,446-447 have the same finding. Ukers, *All About Coffee*, p. 527 shows how German imports towered over other European totals between 1853 and 1933.

<sup>87</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, Oct. 18, 1844.