Empire of Brotherly Love: Philadelphia’s Maritime Trade before Independence, 1700-1775

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One of the most important and controversial aspects of the post-colonial, nation-state dominated era in which we currently live is national mythmaking. Mythmaking provides the basis for national identities that develop over many generations. The United States is no different. In fact, the relatively young nation-state is well-known for its nearly unlimited ability to ignore the uglier parts of its history and highlight the more glorious (and more acceptable) accomplishments in its short history. Excepting perhaps the American Civil War, the American Revolution is likely the most heavily mythologized era of United States history. Furthermore, one of the more enduring myths of the Revolution is the belief that the Revolution was sparked and fought by yeoman farmers who felt oppressed by their imperial overlords in Old World England. Popular phrases such as “taxation without representation” and give me liberty or give me death” often obscure the much more complicated nature of the American Revolution and the conditions that led to the separation of the thirteen American colonies and Great Britain.

Historians and textbooks alike up until a few decades ago tended to reinforce rather than tear down the myth of the American yeoman farmer who emigrated to North America to find fewer religious restrictions and, with his bare hands, beat out a new, brighter future for his family. Slowly, however, historians have begun to chip away on the longstanding narrative of a colonial society dependent on small subsistence farms on a frontier extremely wild compared with the mother country. Just in the last two decades, historians are reexamining the historical records and have found a much more cosmopolitan and trade-based colonial society. In particular, T. H. Breen argues that the American Revolution had much more to do with issues of consumer choice rather any political motivation.¹ In much a similar way, James Fichter shows

how American trade with the East Indies, even before direct trade to the Indian Ocean began, dominated the social and economic conditions of the American colonies. Specifically, Fichter explains how the Boston Tea Party was not in response to new taxes on tea, but rather, Bostonians were upset that the British East India Company had been granted a monopoly of East Indian tea. They dumped the company’s tea not to “protest taxation without representation;” they dumped the tea because they wished to purchase better quality tea (at higher prices) from France or the Netherlands.²

In that vein of scholarship, this paper reconsidered the 18th century economic development of Philadelphia as it relates to the larger British Empire and the coming of the American Revolution. In his book on the role of India within the British Empire in the 19th century, Thomas Metcalf shows that India, by dominating the regional trade networks surrounding its territory, served as a “nodal point” within the British Empire. As Metcalf writes, “If not quite a ‘spider’ sitting at the heart of the web, India is, I argue, more than just one of the many colonial ‘knots’ that may be said to constitute that web.” As India’s economic power grew, so did its political power. Consequently, in the early 20th century, India threw off its imperial master to claim independence and thus a powerful place in the global economy.³ To borrow the web metaphor from Metcalf, Philadelphia developed into a major juncture, point, or “knot” within the larger, British Empire by the middle of the 18th century. By expanding and diversifying its maritime trade networks, Philadelphia made itself indispensable to the British Empire’s Atlantic

and global economy. In the process, it also became a major center of political discussion and dissent as the American Revolution developed.

**Historiography**

In broad strokes, this paper reconsiders the role of Philadelphia within the British Empire and often beyond imperial borders. Rather than accept the traditional narrative of a fully consolidated British Empire in North America, it asks whether Philadelphia was merely a periphery of the London metropole, or did it play a more central role in the empire’s maritime trade? In the past few decades, historians have broken down and often rejected entirely the notion that empires were hegemonic throughout their territories. In fact, many such as Antoinette Burton and Abigail Swingen have argued that empires were constantly forced to renegotiate with their colonial subjects to maintain even nominal control. World historians for much of the last half of the 20th century have actively sought to bring the colonized into the forefront of imperial and global history, and the transnational approach has become extremely popular. Much of this is in response to Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis that has often been accused of rabid Eurocentrism and lacking complexity. Nevertheless, the scholarship that resulted from the debate has reinvigorated the study of imperial history, but not by focusing on the empire itself. Rather, focus has shifted to the effects of imperialism on former colonial subjects, such as Mike

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Davis’s *Late Victorian Holocausts*, and the role of indigenous peoples in shaping empires, such as the already mentioned book from Thomas Metcalf.⁶

**Early Philadelphia**

When establishing the colony of Pennsylvania, William Penn realized that maritime commerce would be central to the success of the venture. Therefore, he sought to find an ideal location for a port that could service the needs of a large region of agriculturally productive land. That port needed to be able to grow with the colony and its changing economic needs. Though Penn envisioned a more subsistence-based society, he recognized that maritime commerce would allow for Pennsylvanians to live above a mere subsistence level by selling surplus crops and timber products in the larger, Atlantic marketplace. Though he did not understand it at the time, his choice of location for the port of Philadelphia allowed it to not only become a place where surplus agricultural products could find a home; Philadelphia also developed into a bustling, cosmopolitan center of economic activity beyond mere subsistence. Though agricultural production remained the primary economic activity for most of Pennsylvania throughout the colonial period, Philadelphia’s location on the banks of a river relatively deep into the hinterland granted agricultural production access to a worldwide market otherwise unattainable. In fact, being located on the major waterway into the interior of Pennsylvania made agricultural expansion into the frontier economically feasible and desirable.⁷

Naturally, the question of whether farmers in Pennsylvania were all that interested in producing for a market is not entirely resolved. However, Winifred Rothenberg, in her study of

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rare daybooks and journals of New England farmers, noticed that farmers were paying regular attention to market prices and weather conditions on the coast. New England farmers were also loyal subscribers to newspapers from major ports such as Boston which often published daily arrivals and departures of ships and their cargoes. Furthermore, merchant advertisements soliciting agricultural products from farmers were quite common in those same newspapers.\(^8\)

Though this author is unaware of a similar study of Pennsylvania farmers, it is not illogical to assume that farmers, especially those within reach of the Delaware River and its estuaries, would be inclined to keep tabs on market prices in order to sell their surpluses or choose which crops to sow. In addition, one of the first structures built in Philadelphia was a wharf that could accommodate a ship up to five hundred tons, indicating a desire to engage in maritime trade beyond the mere coastal skiffs.\(^9\)

From the beginning of maritime commerce in Philadelphia, merchants appear to have been much more interested in trading along the coast and to the West Indies. In the earliest official port records of Philadelphia that I have found so far, the port exported tobacco from the Chesapeake and the region around the city. In the Port of Philadelphia’s customs house records, there is an account book that details the duties received from tobacco exported from the port. What is fascinating about these records is that it also details where the tobacco was going, the taxes paid, and often the amount of tobacco that was shipped. Most interestingly, there is not a single entry that list London or the British Isles as the destination beyond the transfer of currency to the imperial treasury. In fact, the distribution of destinations was overwhelmingly directed towards the West Indies – Barbados in particular. Of 205 entries of ships leaving Philadelphia,


127 of those ships were heading to Barbados in the Caribbean. The next closest port of destination is Boston at 23 total entries. This implies that Philadelphia began its life as a British colonial port that was oriented away from the metropole rather than functioning as a periphery.10

Table 1: Distribution of Philadelphia Tobacco Exports, 1704-09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th># of Ships</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anguilla</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antigua</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bermuda</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curaçao and Bonire</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfoundland</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>205</strong></td>
<td><strong>78%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Indies</strong></td>
<td><strong>160</strong></td>
<td><strong>78%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North America</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>22%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Philadelphia as Nodal Center**

As Table 1 shows quite clearly, the Philadelphia began its maritime trade with little focus on sending goods to the British Isles. In fact, the vast majority of goods leaving and coming into the Port of Philadelphia were going to and coming from other colonies and other empires. In the period of 1730-1734, 959 ships cleared the port in those five years. Of those 959 clearances, only 138 or 15% went to either England or Ireland. Thus, 85% of those ships went elsewhere. 43% (416) went to the West Indies, and 33% (312) sailed throughout the coast of North America (see

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Appendix). This trend continued throughout the 18th century with Great Britain and Ireland only making up 12.6% of total exports from Philadelphia by 1772.

Philadelphia’s export trade throughout the 18th century excepting the first decade, was dominated by grain and flour. Wheat is the most common commodity coming out of Philadelphia, but the form of the commodity changed over time. Initially, raw grain was dominant, but as the colony developed, flour and bread (of various types) became primary. This transition indicates a couple of developments. First, exporting flour rather than grain suggest a growing mill industry that required capital investment beyond just subsistence milling. Second, it hints at a growing separation between farmer and merchant. Rather than take the grain directly to the merchant, the farmer may only need to sell or contract his grain with a mill owner/operator who would then sell milled flour to merchants in the grade (coarse, fine, etc.) and quantity they requested.

The growth in Philadelphia’s grain trade was substantial. Philadelphia exported 38,570 barrels of flour in 1730, but by 1774, 265,967 barrels were shipped out of the port – a 590% increase! Wheat and flour were rarely sent in large amounts to Britain proper. Rather, the West Indies continued to serve as a major market for Philadelphia’s grain and flour production. In Table 2, the destinations of bread and flour from Philadelphia are broken down into regions. West Indian destinations remain about one-third of total exports. Surprisingly, Southern Europe is also roughly a third of Philadelphia’s bread and flour trade. This destination will be discussed.

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in more detail later in this paper. Nevertheless, Philadelphia merchants clearly were oriented away from the mother country, focusing instead on colonial and inter-imperial markets.

**Table 2: Exports of Bread and Flour from Philadelphia, 1768-72 (Tons)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>West Indies</th>
<th>Southern Europe</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Ireland/England</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Value (£ PA Currency)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>6,970</td>
<td>4,353</td>
<td>5,367</td>
<td>1,688</td>
<td>18,378</td>
<td>330,726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1769</td>
<td>10,630</td>
<td>15,212</td>
<td>6,866</td>
<td>1,443</td>
<td>34,151</td>
<td>514,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>11,212</td>
<td>13,206</td>
<td>7,376</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>32,696</td>
<td>515,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>12,253</td>
<td>8,838</td>
<td>7,923</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>29,564</td>
<td>517,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td>11,556</td>
<td>10,977</td>
<td>7,054</td>
<td>1,572</td>
<td>30,159</td>
<td>615,244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Another commodity that Philadelphia traded in large amounts was rum. In Table 3, the amount of rum imported into Philadelphia is shown. By 1772 over a million gallons of rum was being imported into Philadelphia from the West Indies and the rest of North America. Not surprisingly, the majority of those imports came from the West Indies, 77% of 1768’s total imports. However, of those total imports, roughly a quarter each year were reexported back out to the coast of North America. This is not unusual for Philadelphia. It appears that Philadelphia served as a stopping point for quite a few commodities, grain being the best example. Yet, merchants such as Charles Stewart created little empires of their own by creating large networks of other merchants, suppliers, and consumers. Most maintained complex account books with merchants from all over the Atlantic. More often than not, the number of each merchants’ connections with merchants in London were dwarfed by the amount of connections in North America and in the West Indies.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{14}\) Charles Stewart Letterbooks, 1751-63, in HSP.
### Table 3: Imports of Rum into Philadelphia (Gallons)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>West Indies</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Value (£ sterling)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>557,685</td>
<td>168,246</td>
<td>725,931</td>
<td>93,412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1769</td>
<td>734,342</td>
<td>167,699</td>
<td>902,041</td>
<td>108,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>715,061</td>
<td>237,860</td>
<td>952,921</td>
<td>106,852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>521,085</td>
<td>204,877</td>
<td>725,962</td>
<td>77,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td>761,255</td>
<td>256,172</td>
<td>1,017,427</td>
<td>130,697</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 4: Reexports of Rum to North America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Value (£ sterling)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>140,636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1769</td>
<td>177,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>209,549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>167,864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td>214,532</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In the first half of the 18th century, British officials and policymakers wrestled with how to control trade moving through and around Britain’s colonies. British merchants sought to sell their goods to colonists while importing raw materials and commodities from the peripheries of empire.\(^{15}\) Thus, mercantilist policies were slowly passed and were enforced with varying degrees of success. As Philadelphia merchants generally oriented their trade towards the West Indies and the coast of North America, they were less than picky with whom they traded. Philadelphia merchants regularly shipped their goods to Dutch and French colonies, even engaging in trade with pirates.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Much has been written on British Imperial policy and Mercantilism more broadly. Two older volumes that speak directly to its effects on British America are Albert Anthony Giesecke, *American Commercial Legislation before 1789* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1910); and Oliver Morton Dickerson, *American Colonial Government, 1696-1765: A Study of the British Board of Trade in its Relation to the American Colonies, Political, Industrial, Administrative* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1912).

Therefore, smuggling and the problems associated with it were of primary concern to British officials and customs houses. In the Port of Philadelphia Customs House records, the first volume or so is largely composed of documents relating to court cases regarding possible smugglers. For instance, a customs official in Barbados had impounded a ship that was carrying Spanish soap that was still packaged in chests that were much like the chests that Spanish merchants used. In effect, the official charged the captain with merely moving the chests from a Spanish ship to a Philadelphia ship to hopefully smuggle into Barbados.\footnote{Port of Philadelphia Customs House Papers, 1704-89, Vol. 1, HSP.}

Of additional concern was the continuous importation and export of goods from British colonies and rival empires. The very first document in the Customs House records detail the job requirements of the customs officers for Philadelphia. The British official suggested to his deputy: “I, therefore, most earnestly recommend it to you, to be particularly careful, that no foreign vessel touching in your district, land any tea, linen, or any other European or Asiatic commodity.”\footnote{Ibid.} Smuggling was indeed a major problem as Wim Klooster argues that between 1760-1780 that 75\% of tea consumed in British North America was smuggled into the colonies.\footnote{Wim Klooster, “Inter-Imperial Smuggling in the Americas, 1600-1800,” in Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault, Eds., *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500-1830* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 179.}

For most of the 18th century, British efforts to quell smuggling and inter-imperial trade were limited in both form and success. Part of the problem was that legislators had assumed that most of the colonial trade would be handled by ships owned by British merchants and companies. Unfortunately, that was just not the case.\footnote{Thomas C. Barrow, *Trade and Empire: The British Customs Service in Colonial America, 1660-1775* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 6.} Colonial owned shipping managed to carve out a substantial profit from not only carrying colonial products but products from around
the Atlantic and beyond. Though the data available are not perfect, the charges for freight carried on board colonial-owned shipping was greater than the value of any one commodity exported from the colonies.\(^{21}\)

Following the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War with France in 1763, Britain redoubled its efforts to limit colonial smuggling. This time, however, British officials were slightly more successful; though in their success, dramatically increased tensions between the colonists and the metropole.\(^{22}\) However, in the British efforts to consolidate its newly expanded empires, Philadelphia played a central role in organizing the British Customs Offices into a more effective force. As early as 1759, officials in Philadelphia served as overseers for customs houses in Quebec City and Montreal as they were captured and occupied by British troops. Furthermore, regular updates and accounts from West Indies ports were sent to Philadelphia to be included in Philadelphia archives throughout the last half of the 18th century.\(^{23}\)

Regardless of British efforts to stop inter-imperial trade, Philadelphia’s trade with Southern Europe only increased during the 18th century. In fact, from 1750-1772, the percentage of Philadelphia’s total annual exports shipped to Southern Europe grew from 7% to 19%\(^{24}\). By 1770, Southern Europe’s share of Philadelphia’s overseas raw wheat exports approached 100%. Table 5 shows how important Southern Europe was to Philadelphia’s grain trade. Combined with the information from Table 2 above, Philadelphia’s merchants may not have considered the British idea of mercantilism all that appealing. From their standpoint, it is understanding that


\(^{22}\) There is much written on the topic of the Navigation Acts and subsequent efforts to raise funds leading to the American Revolution. An older, but solid perspective on the British efforts to enforce its economic policies is Thomas C. Barrow, *Trade and Empire: The British Customs Service in Colonial America, 1660-1775* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

\(^{23}\) Port of Philadelphia Customs House Papers, 1704-89, HSP.

\(^{24}\) McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*, 196.
increased restrictions on foreign trade would have been enormously detrimental to the economy of Philadelphia.

Table 5: Exports of Wheat from Philadelphia, 1768-72 (Bushels)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Southern Europe</th>
<th>British Isles</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Value (£ sterling)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>155,233</td>
<td>19,487</td>
<td>174,720</td>
<td>56,463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1769</td>
<td>165,315</td>
<td>22,740</td>
<td>188,055</td>
<td>51,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>128,541</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>129,386</td>
<td>38,428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>34,581</td>
<td>11,607</td>
<td>46,188</td>
<td>16,027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td>82,888</td>
<td>1,716</td>
<td>84,604</td>
<td>32,953</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The relationship between Philadelphia and Lisbon is of a peculiar nature. Though my database is not entirely complete at this point, there are large numbers of observations that imply that a longstanding trade existed between Lisbon and Philadelphia that not only occurred throughout the 18th century, but it made regular appearances in official port records. This suggests that the British officials were aware of the trade and apparently gave their blessing to the growing trade between the two. In the port registry of Lisbon, one entry is quite confusing considering the nature of 18th century imperial relationships. In that entry a French owned and crewed ship apparently made regular trips between Philadelphia, Lisbon, and sometimes a French colony in the Caribbean. In Philadelphia it picked up a shipload of grain or flour, proceeded to unload that cargo in Lisbon, then continued in ballast (empty) to the Caribbean. It is as yet unclear what, if anything, the ship picked up in the Caribbean, but the entry is intriguing nonetheless. All this suggest that Philadelphia may not have only served as a nodal center of the British Empire, but possibly as a nodal center of the larger, Atlantic economy.

25 Port of Philadelphia Customs House Papers, 1704-89, Vol. 1, HSP. This is just one of several collections held by the HSP that contain clear evidence of Lisbon being a primary port of call for Philadelphia shipping. Most of the collections listed in the Bibliography contain mentions of this trade.
Conclusion

Though Philadelphia had a relatively late start compared to other colonial cities, it soon overtook Boston and New York to become the largest port in the British Atlantic. By the mid-18th century, Philadelphia outpaced the exports of Boston the second largest port in colonial America. In terms of total tonnage that cleared each port, the last year that saw Boston export more than Philadelphia was 1754 when Boston exported 27,200 tons, compared with 25,200 tons in Philadelphia. Yet by the year 1765, Boston exported 28,000 tons of goods; whereas Philadelphia saw 39,500 tons of goods leave its port during the same year. Both Boston and Philadelphia experienced growth in their maritime trade throughout the 18th century, but Philadelphia’s rate of growth was much higher. In 1754 Philadelphia exported 25,200 tons and in 1772 it exported 45,800 tons, an 82% increase in total exports. Boston, on the other hand, saw a 57% increase in the same period.

Though Philadelphia began by exporting tobacco as a cash crop, it soon shifted to a grain and flour dominated export economy. Pennsylvania’s rich agricultural land allowed for substantially greater production of grain than New England. Therefore, Philadelphia needed to expand its shipping industry to meet the growing demands of the fledgling export economy. Investment in the building and purchasing of ships grew from an average annual investment of £12,305 between 1726-29 to an annual average of £80,515 during the years 1770-75, a 554% increase. In the first quarter of the 18th century, sources of investment were divided equally between merchants in Philadelphia and outside investors. However, by 1775, over 75% of

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27 McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*, 196. There is a small chance that these numbers are underestimated based on the database currently being created by this paper’s author. It also does not include exports from ships not registered in the ports from which they are leaving.
investment capital was provided by Philadelphia merchants, indicating that capital investment was not merely the purview of the metropole. Furthermore, Philadelphia also developed a competitive shipbuilding industry, providing roughly 10% of the ships built in British America in the years 1775-76.

Ultimately, the thirteen original British American colonies became far more important to the British Empire than is commonly understood. In fact, colonial owned shipping tonnage was just shy of one-third of the entire British Empire’s total tonnage by the 1770s. John J. McCusker estimates that the entire British merchant marine, during the 1770s, consisted of 1.5 million tons, and the American colonies controlled roughly 500,000 tons. What is more surprising is that Philadelphia owned or controlled 20% of all colonial tonnage. In addition, ship builders and owners regularly underestimated the total tonnage of each vessel it registered to avoid paying higher duties which were often levied against the vessel’s registered measurements. Understanding these estimates, British military and political efforts to retain imperial control over the colonies and, when reconciliation became impossible, a peace that included provisions providing for reestablished economic trade between Britain and her former colonies appear far more logical.

Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>West Indies</th>
<th>South Europe</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entrances</td>
<td>Clearances</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1730-34</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750-54</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770-74</td>
<td>1,220</td>
<td>1,308</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>1,522</td>
<td>1,699</td>
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</table>

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