

**Journal of the Canadian Historical Association**  
**Revue de la Société historique du Canada**



**Artisans in a Merchant Town: St. John's, Newfoundland, 1775-1816**

Sean Cadigan

Volume 4, Number 1, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031058ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031058ar>

[See table of contents](#)

**Publisher(s)**

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

**ISSN**

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

**Cite this article**

Cadigan, S. (1993). Artisans in a Merchant Town: St. John's, Newfoundland, 1775-1816. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 4(1), 95-119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031058ar>

**Article abstract**

Artisans who specialized in the production of consumer goods in St. John's during the American Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras became neither proletarians nor industrial capitalists as historiography suggests was the fate of others in the Anglo-American world. While limited proletarianization was important among carpenters, and merchant credit dominated artisans in maritime trades, some producers of consumer goods made the transition from artisan to merchant. Evidence drawn from court records, newspapers and government correspondence suggests that some St. John's artisans found greater opportunities in building on the accounting and trading skills they acquired from the retail and importing aspects of their trade rather than in manufacturing as such. Mercantile activity rather than manufacture offered the best chance for capital accumulation in an economy characterized by the resource and structural impediments of monostaple production.

# Artisans in a Merchant Town: St. John's, Newfoundland, 1775-1816

SEAN CADIGAN

## *Résumé*

*Artisans who specialized in the production of consumer goods in St. John's during the American Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras became neither proletarians nor industrial capitalists as historiography suggests was the fate of others in the Anglo-American world. While limited proletarianization was important among carpenters, and merchant credit dominated artisans in maritime trades, some producers of consumer goods made the transition from artisan to merchant. Evidence drawn from court records, newspapers and government correspondence suggests that some St. John's artisans found greater opportunities in building on the accounting and trading skills they acquired from the retail and importing aspects of their trade rather than in manufacturing as such. Mercantile activity rather than manufacture offered the best chance for capital accumulation in an economy characterized by the resource and structural impediments of monostaple production.*

\* \* \* \*

*Les artisans occupés à la production de biens de consommation à Saint-Jean, à l'époque de la révolution américaine et des guerres napoléoniennes, ne devinrent ni prolétaires ni industriels capitalistes comme le suggère l'historiographie de leurs semblables, ailleurs dans le monde anglo-américain. S'il est vrai qu'un mouvement partiel de prolétarisation advint chez les charpentiers et que le crédit marchand en vint à dominer les artisans des métiers reliés à la navigation, il est aussi vrai que des producteurs de biens de consommations se convertirent en marchands plutôt qu'en manufacturiers. Les archives judiciaires, les journaux et la correspondance gouvernementale suggèrent en effet que certains artisans de Saint-Jean choisirent, pour augmenter leurs activités, de miser davantage sur le savoir comptable et marchand que leur avait procuré le commerce de détail et l'importation liés à leur métier et de laisser de côté la fabrication proprement dite. L'exploitation d'une ressource unique limitant les structures et les ressources de l'économie, l'activité marchande offrait une meilleure chance d'accumulation du capital.*

---

This paper has benefitted from the advice of a number of people in addition to the editor and referees of this journal: Gerald Friesen, Gregory Kealey, John Mannion, Laura B. Morgan, Rosemary Ommer, Mark Leier and Danny Vickers. Any mistakes are solely my responsibility. An SSHRC post-doctoral fellowship funded the research on which this essay is based.

Three views dominate the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American artisans. The best known is E.P. Thompson's examination of artisan contributions to English working-class formation. Bryan Palmer develops this artisans-into-workers perspective in Canadian historiography, although he is sensitive to the place of mechanics in the producing classes of preindustrial-capitalist society. The second view, best developed by H.G. Gutman, follows the careers of artisans who became industrial capitalists. A third perspective tends to define artisans as a political and economic fraternity of labour aristocrats and petite bourgeoisie struggling against the interests of great merchants in staple trade. Part of this third view shares with American historiography a debate about whether merchants or artisans dominated the transition to industrial capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

The history of St. John's, Newfoundland in the American Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras suggests, however, the utility of a fourth view of artisans which sees them as capable of becoming other than workers, industrialists, or petty producers locked into conflict with staple merchants. While working-class formation proved to be important among building-trades artisans, and subordination to merchants important among those in marine trades, artisans in other, non-maritime trades followed a fourth path by becoming merchants themselves. Occupation appears to have been the decisive factor in explaining how some St. John's artisans accomplished this. Tailors, butchers and watchmakers, that is artisans who were likely to develop a retail trade as an extension of consumer production, were the ones who became merchants, although many simply remained retailers. Resource and structural impediments in an economy dominated by monostaple production ensured that trade rather than manufacture provided the greatest opportunities for capital accumulation among these artisans.

Artisans had been part of the St. John's economy from at least 1728, although planters (resident petty producers in the fishery), fishing servants and merchants were preponderate among the local population. The American Revolution and the Napoleonic wars developed the port as a military and administrative centre, providing more

- 
1. See Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex, Eng., 1968), and Bryan D. Palmer, "Kingston Mechanics and the Rise of the Penitentiary, 1833-36," *Histoire sociale-Social History*, XIII, 25 (May 1980): 7-32 as well as *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto, 1991), 35-80. Bruce Laurie's *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1989) is the source of my terminology here. On the second path see Gutman, "The Reality of the Rags-to-Riches 'Myth': The Case of the Paterson, New Jersey, Locomotive, Iron, and Machinery Manufacturers, 1830-1900," in Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1977), 211-33. For the third view see T.W. Acheson, *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto, 1985). For a Canadian perspective on the artisans-versus-merchants debate see Robert Sweeney, "Internal Dynamics and the International Cycle: Questions of the Transition in Montreal 1821-1828," (PhD. diss., McGill University, 1985). On the American literature see Gary J. Kornblith, "From Artisans to Businessmen: Master Mechanics in New England, 1789-1850," (PhD. diss., Princeton University, 1983), vi-vii.

opportunities for artisans. British Royal Engineers who were responsible for the construction of fortifications and government buildings recruited greater numbers of building-trades artisans, especially carpenters, many of whom stayed on in St. John's. Wartime disruption of British merchants' migratory trade to Newfoundland gave St. John's a greater metropolitan role in the British fishery.<sup>3</sup> Increased economic activity and administration in the port encouraged the growth of population [see Table 1] and, consequently, a larger local consumer market.<sup>3</sup> Greater numbers of artisans then took up residence in the town to supply this market.<sup>4</sup>

St. John's artisans, however, laboured under economic disadvantages stemming from the manner in which the fishery dominated the Newfoundland economy. Both the resident and migratory fisheries flourished after the Revolution, and these industries absorbed much of the Irish and local markets in which artisans attempted to recruit labour.<sup>5</sup> Not only did demand in the fishery restrict the supply of labour to artisans, but laws which obliged planters and servants to pay fishing servants' wages before other debts further encouraged servants to enter the fishery rather than look for other employment in St. John's. In neither law nor practice did Newfoundland courts recognize similar privileges for artisans.<sup>6</sup>

- 
2. John Mannion, "St. John's," in R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada, I, From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto, 1987), plate 27; Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St. John's, 1988), 115-20, 167-68; Stuart R. Sutherland, "Pringle, Robert," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, IV, 1771-1800* (Toronto, 1979), 647-48.
  3. Figures in this table are calculated from Table 5.1 in W. Gordon Handcock, *So long as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1989), 102. Handcock uses decadal means to deal with accuracy problems in the numerous censuses available from the annual governors' returns of Newfoundland's population and fishery in the CO 194s. Handcock wanted to estimate St. John's permanent population from statistics which counted the great number of summer and winter transient labour in the fishery. He established an index of permanence by adding the total number of wintering females with an equal number of males, and then added the enumerated children (or 2F+C). The resulting average permanent population figures uniformly underestimate St. John's population by excluding its semi-permanent working population. The figures nevertheless are the best available indication of trends in population development. St. John's District included the fishing/farming communities of Petty Harbour, Torbay and Quidi Vidi.
  4. Matthews, *Lectures*, 115-20.
  5. Shannon Ryan, "Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815," in P.A. Buckner and David Frank, eds., *The Acadiensis Reader, I, Atlantic Canada Before Confederation* (Fredericton, 1985), 134.
  6. Imperial policy persisted in trying to buttress the migratory fishery against the growth of residency. The main instrument of this policy was 15 George III, cap. 31 (Palliser's Act), passed in 1775, which provided privileged guarantees of payment of wages set according to preset contracts between seamen and fishermen and their employers. The act reserved half wages payable in England at the end of a servant's contract regardless of debts accumulated in Newfoundland. British officials designed the act to return servants to Great Britain so that the migratory fishery would continue to employ the surplus labour of the kingdom as well as provide a market for British manufactures and agriculture. Court decisions at Newfoundland

The extremely limited nature of Newfoundland agricultural resources additionally inhibited the growth of artisanal production. The resident fishery depended almost completely on imports of consumer and capital goods from North America and Great Britain. As well, there were few local agricultural bi-products which might have served as inputs in local manufacture. The import trade further tied Newfoundland consumers to well-established artisans such as cordwainers, chandlers, bakers and brewers, as well as shipbuilders and manufacturers of capital equipment required by the fishery in Ireland and England.<sup>7</sup>

The onset of the Napoleonic wars generated a greater demand for artisans at St. John's. By 1796, in restoring old fortifications and building new ones, the Royal Engineers were employing 44 carpenters, nine masons, two smiths, two sawyers 11 miners, two limeburners, and 32 labourers on the works. All of the labourers were hired in St. John's. Even more significant was that 29 of the carpenters were residents of St. John's, as well as three of the masons.<sup>8</sup> No matter what obstacles lay in the path of artisans, continued growth in residency and port status meant that some artisans became more important in the St. John's economy. Of these, carpenters were the most significant contributors to the diversification of the resident economy. A growing town required more buildings, and while merchants in staple trade could import most of the

---

extended privileged wage guarantees to resident fishing servants. See Sean T. Cadigan, "Seamen, Fishermen and the Law: The Role of the Wages and Lien System in the Decline of Wage Labour in the Newfoundland Fishery," in Colin Howell and Richard J. Twomey, *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (Fredericton, 1991), 105-131; "Merchant Capital, the State, and Labour in a British Colony: Servant-Master Relations and Capital Accumulation in Newfoundland's Northeast-Coast Fishery, 1775-1799," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, 2 (1991): 17-42. See also Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), GN5/2/A/1, Minutes of the Supreme Court of Newfoundland, Box 1, Book 1802-1804; John Chappel vs. Laurence Fortune, 1 December 1803. Chappel was a shipwright who sued Fortune for £221.11.5 for work on a vessel when the latter became insolvent. The Supreme Court ruled that Chappel had no right to be considered the same as Fortune's fishing servants, or even to have a preferred claim to Fortune's merchants, or current suppliers.

7. The ties to English artisans are hinted at in Keith Matthews, "History of the West of England-Newfoundland Fishery," (PhD diss., Oxford University, 1968), 1-10 and E.F.J. Mathews, "Economic History of Poole 1756-1815," (PhD diss., University of London, 1958), 22-71. A much fuller examination of the continuing importance of Irish manufactures in the Newfoundland market is John Mannion, "The Waterford Merchants and the Irish-Newfoundland Provisions Trade, 1770-1820," in D.H. Akenson, ed. *Canadian Papers in Rural History, III* (Gananoque, 1982), 178-203. Newfoundland's agricultural limits are more fully explored in Sean Cadigan, "The Staple Model Reconsidered: The Case of Agricultural Policy in Northeast Newfoundland, 1785-1855," *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring): 48-71.
8. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Colonial Office Papers 194 (CO 194), vol. 39, 1796-97, Microfilm B-678, f. 50; Lt. Col. Skinner, "Return of Officers, Artificers & Labourers . . ." St. John's, 24 October 1796.

## ARTISANS IN A MERCHANT TOWN

manufactures required by St. John's, the construction of buildings necessarily involved local artisanal production, contributing to domestic economic diversification.

Only 591 households existed in St. John's at the beginning of the wars with the French, but artisans were already an important part of the economic and social life of the community. While fishermen and shoremen made up 50 per cent of the town's households, artisans were the next largest group, comprising 20 per cent of St. John's households. Artisans were more numerous than either merchants or the variety of government and service-sector occupational groups residing in Newfoundland's administrative centre [see Table 2].

Artisan householders in St. John's were, for the most part, not employed in marine trades. Only one quarter were coopers, shipcarpenters, sailmakers and blockmakers. Instead, artisans in the building trades dominated. Tailors and shoemakers were a significant minority, but much smaller numbers of bakers, butchers, and watchmakers suggests limited potential for import substitution in the port [see Table 3]. These latter artisans provided preparation and maintenance services otherwise not easily available to local consumers. Additionally, services such as those of a barber could only be provided by resident artisans.

Little evidence exists to allow an assessment of the place of artisans within the social and economic structure of St. John's, although artisans in other parts of North America generally fell into the upper strata of the producing classes as marketers of skills instead of labour.<sup>9</sup> A rough measure of the economic and social status of artisans in St. John's is the extent of their share of property ownership in the port. Most of St. John's householders did not own their homes: only 139 owners held the town's 591 households in 1794-95. The average number of households per owner was 4.25. A very small number of groups held more than this average: 42, or 30 per cent of the total number of owners. Together, these 42 owners held 382 households, or 64 per cent of the total number of 591 households in St. John's. Absentee landlords dominated the largest household owners. These would be the heirs of planters who had taken up property before 1685, or had occupied land not used for the migratory fishery between 1685 and 1699 as stipulated by 10 and 11 William III, cap. 25 (King William's Act), passed by the House of Commons in 1699 to govern the Newfoundland fishery. After 1699 other planters could have established rights to land by uninterrupted usage in the fish trade, or like the Stripling and Brooks family (who together owned 44 households), through grants from the governors for public service.<sup>10</sup> Next to the absentees were a small number of merchants,

---

9. Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1979), 3. Although the bulk of his evidence deals with post-1840 society, see T.W. Acheson's discussion of artisans in *Saint John*, 67-91.

10. Melvin Baker, "Absentee Landlordism and Municipal Government in Nineteenth Century St. John's," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Guelph, June 1984.

although one merchant, George Hutchings, owned more houses (25) in St. John's than any other single person. Only three artisans owned more than four houses [see Table 4].<sup>11</sup>

King's carpenter John Sawyer owned 14, more households than any other artisan. Ship carpenter Henry Radford and barber-surgeon Joseph Kavanagh (also called a hairdresser<sup>12</sup>) followed Sawyer with five each. The carpenters' greater importance among artisan house-owners in St. John's probably stemmed from their trade. Carpenters' skills were not only indispensable to the building and maintenance of the public works at St. John's, but also of the merchants' warehouses, stores, wharves, and other wooden structures so essential to the port's growing metropolitan functions. Like other carpenters throughout North American towns of the period, their skills gave them an advantage distinct from other artisans in building for speculative rentier functions.<sup>13</sup>

Carpenters' skills most likely provided them with legal privileges unavailable to other non-maritime St. John's artisans. Palliser's Act reserved for migratory fishing ships all unoccupied water frontage (called rooms) in the harbour, while other laws allowed only planters and merchants usage property rights (Newfoundland had no law of real property). Governors routinely allowed merchants to encroach on fishing-ships rooms, but denied access to most artisans.<sup>14</sup> Yet carpenters like Sawyer and Radford faced no such impediments, probably because government officials recognized that the fishery and trade required their buildings to be prosecuted successfully. Carpenters who were relatives of old planter families could base their property rights on their families' continuous usage, and probably acquired their skills at first working in their families' fisheries. Putting their skills to use in building dwellings for people employed in the fishery could also be accepted as necessary to the fishery. Henry Radford was such a case. Radford's family had been planters long involved in the St. John's fishery. His father received land grants in the west end of the harbour to build facilities for his fishery, and employed schooners and smaller boats in the bank fishery. Radford trained his son Henry as a shipwright to repair their own vessels, and probably to find additional opportunities in the repair of others. When losses to privateering during the American Revolution ended the Radfords' extensive involvement in the fishery, Henry supported his family by continuing on in his trade, as well as by leasing out most of the family's waterfront

---

11. PANL, GN2/39/A, Census of St. John's, 1794-95.

12. On the nature of hairdressing as an artisanal trade see the description of hairdresser John Howland's apprenticeship, journeymen's years, and mastery of his trade in Providence, Rhode Island in the late eighteenth century in Kornblith, "Artisans to Businessmen," ch. 6.

13. Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca and London, 1989), 33. Carpenters were also among the most important artisans in St. John, New Brunswick. See Acheson, *Saint John*, 71.

14. Sean T. Cadigan, "The Role of the Fishing Ships' Rooms Controversy in the Rise of a Local Bourgeoisie: St. John's, Newfoundland, 1775-1812," paper presented to the Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, St. John's, May 1992.

premises to merchants and trying to engage in mercantile activity himself.<sup>15</sup> Building and renting houses, non-maritime carpentry, became an important part of Radford's business.

Artisan property-owners supported St. John's merchants who were becoming increasingly conscious of their lack of property rights. Henry Radford, for example, backed merchants who fought for *de facto* real property rights in St. John's. The merchants' method involved using an artisan in an attempt to trick the governor into making a grant to someone not involved in the fishery. In 1795, St. John's merchants backed hairdresser Joseph Kavanagh's attempt to build on a ship's room with the governor's permission under pretence that he was simply expanding a house.<sup>16</sup> Unable to understand why "a poor Hairdresser" would want to build a 60-65 by 45-50 feet building instead of extending a house, Governor Waldegrave concluded that "there was some collusion in the business" among merchants to obtain property rights by tricking him into making a grant of ship's room to someone not at all involved in the fishery.<sup>17</sup> Artisans such as Radford, Sawyer and Kavanagh might be best understood as part of a merchant-dominated town bourgeoisie unified by a growing realization of the value of local real estate. Radford, for example, continued to support merchants' further confrontations with Waldegrave over the low prices the governor offered for land he wanted to expropriate for government purposes.<sup>18</sup>

Although a carpenter like Radford stood with merchants in such political struggles over property rights, dependence on credit ensured most other artisans' subordinate relationships with St. John's merchants. In an economy devoted to monostaple trading activity, most St. John's artisans, like fishermen, relied on merchants for almost all of their supplies of provisions and capital equipment. Governor Waldegrave remarked in 1799, on observing a work stoppage on St. John's Anglican church, that local merchants "take every possible advantage of the necessities of the Artificers and labourers, so on the other hand these oppress'd people seldom let the opportunity escape them of retaliating when they have the means of so doing."<sup>19</sup> Journeyman carpenters and labourers took advantage of the rapidly disappearing building season to strike before winter snow ruined the unroofed structure. Waldegrave, angry at merchants for their continued opposition to his property policies, sympathized with their artisan opponents.

---

15. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-376, ff 1134-36; petition of Henry Radford to Governor Duckworth, 1810.

16. CO 194, vol. 42, 1799-1800, B-679, ff. 102; petition of Joseph Kavanagh to Waldegrave, St. John's, 8 October 1799; f. 104-05. Besides Routh, William Carter, A. Buchanan, J. Harries, William Eppes, William Elmes, P. McKie, R. Reed, T. Williams, G. Williams, Rod. Robertson, H. Phillips, Alexander Cormack, John Bell, D. Rennie, George Elliott, and R. Bollard signed a certificate in support of Kavanagh; f. 106-108; Waldegrave to G. Williams, St. John's, 16 October 1799; Williams and George Hutchings to Waldegrave, St. John's, 17 October 1799.

17. CO 194, vol. 42, 1799-1800, B-679, ff. 98-100; Waldegrave to Portland, St. John's, 21 October 1799.

18. Cadigan, "Rise of a Local Bourgeoisie."

19. PANL, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, "C" Series correspondence, Box 1a/18, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, 1792-1838, ff 158-59; Governor Waldegrave to the Duke of Portland, London, 25 February 1799.

Artisans might well have owned or controlled most of the material means of production, but only merchants commanded credit. It was the merchants, therefore, who controlled the crucial means of capital accumulation in Newfoundland. The Anglican church affair offers some perspective on the relationship between merchants and artisans. Merchants George Hutchings, John Bell, George Gaden, Henry Phillips, Alexander Cormack, and Richard Reed formed a committee to oversee the building of the church in 1798. They awarded a contract to John Sawer for the work. The latter underestimated the expense of building the church, and this forced the Committee to look to the governor for financial assistance. While the merchants attempted to blame Sawer's incompetence for the extra expense, Governor Waldegrave charged that the high prices merchants charged for supplying the needs of Sawer's workmen forced carpenters to strike for wages of £0.6.6 per day. Merchants also charged inflated prices for timber and plank they supplied to Sawer. When Sawer died in 1799 the committee allowed his contract to pass to George Winter.<sup>20</sup>

Later disputes arising from the settlement of Sawer's estate suggest that master carpenters stood between their employees and merchants, and were as reliant on merchant credit for construction materials. One law suit revealed that Sawer obtained his lime and laths from Thomas Todridge, a merchant who happened to be a tenant of Sawer's.<sup>21</sup> When Andrew Mossman sued Sawer's estate for £19.7.2 for liquor and other goods he supplied to people working on the new church, the court referred Mossman to Winter.<sup>22</sup> Merchant Alexander Cormack, a member of the committee which had awarded Sawer the initial contract, won a suit against Sawer's estate because Cormack had extracted a promise from Sawer to be personally responsible for supplies Cormack furnished to workmen at the church.<sup>23</sup> In fact, some of the carpenters working on the church kept accounts directly with Cormack, depending on their wages from the master carpenter to pay their debt. Carpenter Francis Murphy, for example, revealed that he could not pay his debt to Cormack on time because Winter had not yet paid his wages.<sup>24</sup>

Carpenters were the only group of artisans to demonstrate any mutual defence of their interests, probably because of their greater numbers and the collective nature of work such as the church contract. Public works and quasi-public works like the church

---

20. PANL, SPG correspondence, "C" series, Box 1a/18, f. 153; Hutchings et al. to Waldegrave, St. John's, 19 December 1798; f. 163; Richard Reed, John Bell, George Hutchings, George Gaden, Henry Phillips, Jonathan Ogden, and Thomas Skinner to Waldegrave, St. John's, 29 December 1799.

21. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; estate of John Sawer vs. estate of Thomas Todridge, 4 December 1802, £30 due for rent.

22. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; Mossman vs. estate of John Sawer, 15 November 1802.

23. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; Cormack vs. estate of John Sawer, £42, 25 October 1802.

24. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; Cormack vs. Francis Murphy for £37.9.3, 15 November 1802.

were not the only large projects carpenters worked on, however. In 1800 Dr. John Macurdy (listed in the 1794-95 census as an owner of six houses<sup>25</sup>) hired five carpenters to repair the house he lived in. Dennis Scott, John Fulton, Patrick Rourke, Andrew St. John, and Thomas Steers, "together with many others," engaged in a combination to raise their wages by forming a compact among town carpenters not to accept jobs for less than £0.6.6 per day. The Supreme Court responded to this fledgling union by arresting the carpenters. Faced with possible legal prosecution despite the fact that Newfoundland had no Master and Servant Act, the carpenters forestalled court action by apologizing. Judicial officials were far more representative of local, merchant-dominated economic interests, and bore no sympathy for carpenters such as that shown by a temporary governor like Waldegrave.<sup>26</sup>

Carpentry was a trade unique in St. John's: it alone generated court cases which suggested that master artisans extensively relied on journeymen for labour. The courts occasionally heard disputes involving other artisans, particularly in maritime trades, but these reflected much more individualistic concerns. Some coopers worked directly for merchants in the fish trade. Cooper Owen Whelan, for example, served as a witness for his masters, Hunters & Co., in their dispute with planter-client Thomas Bailey in 1803: a dispute that showed Whelan supplied puncheons to Bailey as the latter had agreed with Hunters & Co.<sup>27</sup> Cooper John Hall, however, appeared to be a client of Andrew Thompson & Co. just like any fisherman might be, since Hall supplied the merchants with fish casks on account. At the end of 1803 Thomson & Co. admitted that they owed Hall a balance of £10.16.0, but wanted him to receive the balance in goods, not cash. The court ruled that Thomson & Co. had no contract to back up their claim, and found in Hall's favour.<sup>28</sup>

Other coopers directly employed by merchants had duties which made them even more dissimilar to journeymen. Michael Hanrahan, for example, worked for Laurence Williams as both a cooper and storekeeper. Williams dismissed Hanrahan and would not pay him wages due to negligence. Hanrahan sued for £40.1.0, and the court found in his favour for £36.7.0, after deducting the cost of some goods Williams had supplied him. The court argued that Williams was responsible for Hanrahan's negligence because he had supplied the cooper with rum, although Hanrahan was a notorious drunk.<sup>29</sup>

Only carpenters became involved in disputes which suggested that they worked in a collective environment, or faced common problems of low wages, delinquent payment from contractors, or masters using truck to erode their wages. Although journeyman

---

25. PANL, GN2/39/A, Census of St. John's, 1794-95.

26. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; "In the Case between Mr. John Macurdy vs. The Carpenters employ'd in repairing his House," 7 November 1800.

27. PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Box 1, Book 1803-1807; Bailey vs. Hunters & Co., £18.10.6 error in account, 10 November 1803.

28. PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Box 1, Book 1803-1807; Hall vs. Thomson & Co., 19 December 1803.

29. PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Box 1, Book 1803-1807; Hanrahan vs. Williams, 4 May 1804.

carpenters did not enjoy the same legal rights as servants in the fishery, the court generally did not sympathize with masters who showed no just cause for being delinquent in wage payments. In 1804, five journeymen sued their master carpenter Michael McDonald because he had not yet paid their wages. Only in two cases did McDonald offer an excuse for his actions, neither of which the court accepted. When Phillip Moore demanded his £32.3.6 wages McDonald claimed that Moore had not furnished the court with a correct accounting of his work. The court decided for Moore because McDonald offered no proof of his objection. McDonald objected to the claim of John Bremore for £20.16.0 wages by charging that Bremore did not properly finish his work. Again, the court did not countenance McDonald's case.<sup>30</sup> Carpenters Edward and Edmund White sued James Hayes for their wages of £11.8.3 in 1805. In both cases the carpenters were actually disputing deductions Hayes had made from their accounts. Both Whites lost over half their wages to Hayes's accounts, getting respective settlements of £5.4.0 and £5.4.10.<sup>31</sup>

Scant evidence exists to suggest much about relationships within artisanal ranks other than carpenters. Newfoundland did not have the colonial or municipal institutions of other British North American towns to enforce the rules of ascent within trades from apprenticeship through journeyman status to master artisan. Apprenticeship was part of the structure of many trades, but little evidence survives about the obligations between masters and their apprentices. There are few notices of run-aways in the *Royal Gazette*.<sup>32</sup> Disputes between masters and journeymen in carpentry suggest some division, but the dispute with merchants over wages on the church issue suggests an equally strong craft cohesion. Masters and journeymen probably understood their service to be governed by some form of the English Master and Servant law, although only laws governing the fishery specifically applied to Newfoundland. As such, notices appear occasionally of the desertion of journeymen, such as Patrick Gleason's notice that blacksmith James Murphy had deserted him, or Goss, Butler & Goss' that their cooper Edward Lane had run away.<sup>33</sup>

Paternalism was important to most trades. The Royal Engineers hired master carpenters and masons to oversee the work of their other artisans. In time of dispute, however, these master artisans spoke as the representatives of their fellow tradesmen. This proved to be the case in 1812 when Captain Durnford wanted to let go his masons and stonemasons. When Durnford first learned that he was not to receive stone from Cape Breton, he wanted to reduce his masons' pay "but the master Artificer who came with

- 
30. PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Box 1, Book 1803-1807; Moore vs. McDonald, Bremore vs. McDonald; Thomas Kavanagh vs. McDonald, £16.18.6 wages; Christopher Cain vs. McDonald, £10.17.3 wages; John Williams vs. McDonald, £16.17.9 wages. The five cases were heard on 19 November 1804.
31. PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Minutes of the Surrogate Court, St. John's, Box 1, Book 1803-1807; Edward White vs. James Hayes, £11.8.3; and Edmund White vs. Hayes, £11.8.3, 6 February 1805.
32. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 2 August 1810; 10 June 1813.
33. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 12 May 1814.

the men, informed me their full pay was positively granted to them by the Storekeeper at Clonmel winter and summer unless they forfeited any by wilful Irregularity.<sup>34</sup> Durnford consequently had to negotiate and pay passage out of Newfoundland for the masons.<sup>34</sup>

That they were all Irish craftsmen dealing with an English captain of the British army most likely reinforced the bonds between masters and men among the masons. Ethnicity was a potentially strong reinforcement of paternalism among St. John's artisans. Journeymen's aspirations of becoming masters may well have encouraged a strong sense of craft community between the two groups. Cabinet-maker George Hancock in 1815, for example, thought that he had been taken on as a partner of Mark Green, although Green had hired him as a journeyman. Hancock eventually went into business for himself.<sup>35</sup> The overall picture suggests that artisans saw themselves as members of a hierarchical, respectable social group, but one in which advancement was not only possible but also expected. While individual discontent occasionally bubbled to the surface among apprentices and journeymen, no class division cut paternalist bonds, except perhaps among the carpenters who formed the town's largest trade outside the fishery.<sup>36</sup>

The Napoleonic wars forced St. John's officials to grant more property rights to artisans outside the waterfront area. As St. John's continued to grow [refer to Table 1], merchants, traders and government officials alike required greater numbers of artisans to build their shops, warehouses, wharves, fortifications, and homes, as well as service their needs. Such craftsmen's presence had become so integral to St. John's economic and social structure that Governor Gower undertook, although unsuccessfully, to secure them property rights to unused ships rooms in the harbour.<sup>37</sup>

Despite this continuing legal obstacle, artisans provided most of the membership of the volunteer militia: 59 per cent of a total membership of 263 in 1806, and 61 per cent of a total 96 in 1809-10 when the military threat had lessened [see Table 5]. Although no census data exists to establish the structure of artisanal occupations in the Napoleonic era, Volunteer enlistment rolls suggest that artisans in non-maritime trades continued to outnumber those in maritime trades by almost three to one in the period. Seventy-three per cent of all Volunteer artisans in 1806 (or 113 out of 154 total artisans), and 71 per cent in 1809-10 (or 42 out of 59 total artisans) were in non-maritime trades [see Tables 6 and 7]. Carpenters continued to be the most numerous of artisans, followed by coopers,

---

34. PANL, GB2/1, Box 1805-14, Book 1812-14; Durnford to Crew, St. John's, 2 May 1812.

35. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 18 May 1815.

36. On the strength of paternalism among artisans in other parts of British North America see Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 41-60.

37. CO 194, vol. 44, 1804-05, B-680, ff 34-37; Chief Justice Thomas Tremlett et al. to Gower, report on ships rooms, St. John's, 29 August 1804; ff 38-39; proclamation of Sir E. Gower, St. John's, 29 September 1804; ff 80-81; Gower to Camden, Hermitage, 6 February 1805. GB2/1, Box 1805-14, Book 1805-12; Major of Brigade Jn. Murray to Captain Ross, St. John's, 13 December 1805.

tailors and shoemakers. Only small numbers of other artisans practised their trades in St. John's. Merchants always commanded the companies of the Volunteers, and dominated its commissioned-officer ranks, while artisans reached only the non-commissioned officer ranks. Although taking the most responsibility for defending St. John's, artisans were still subordinate to merchants in the town's socio-economic structure.

Their social and economic dependence on merchant credit probably meant that artisans did not follow the earlier lead of their fellows in American ports in establishing their own militias, units which in turn fostered a greater sense of artisans' separate interests.<sup>38</sup> The point is not that St. John's artisans failed to contribute to a movement for political independence, for such a movement was not even a consideration in an economy which rested so completely on the British fishery. Rather, artisans simply did not have the material base in Newfoundland to become a more important part of St. John's social and economic structure. Even carpenters and masons depended largely on imports of construction materials such as wood and stone.<sup>39</sup>

Without local sources of inputs, St. John's non-maritime artisans (besides carpenters and others in the building trades) largely concentrated on retailing and servicing. Sometimes they simply closed shop, or, if they wanted to achieve great economic success, abandoned production for mercantile activity. Besides local resource constraints, the continuing lack of real property rights may have encouraged artisans to become merchants. While some governors accepted that St. John's growth demanded the orderly alienation of fishing ships' rooms along the waterfront, they were unable to convince British officials that the regulations governing ships' rooms were obsolescent because the migratory fishery was finished, and impeded economic development. As an alternative, governors began selectively to overlook encroachments on the rooms, although this varied from governor to governor. Governor Duckworth eventually secured

---

38. See for example Charles F. Steffen's treatment of the contribution of militia service to artisan consciousness in Baltimore in *The Mechanics of Baltimore: Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution, 1763-1812* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984), 77-78. The growth of artisan production in American towns, based on the increased manufacture of locally-produced raw materials into finished goods, created a political and economic culture disassociated with the dominance of big import-export merchants. Artisans in places like New York and Philadelphia managed to secure the allegiance of other merchants, who dealt in their products, to the cause of independence, and the Democratic-Republican cause of protectionism. See Charles S. Olton, *Artisans for Independence: Philadelphia Mechanics and the American Revolution* (Syracuse, 1975), 65-105; Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1979), 7-45.

39. An early letter from Captain Pringle indicate that there was no local source of pine board, shingles or oak lathes for the public works. St. John's-based merchants would not even take contracts to find external sources. before the revolution, he relied on American merchants. See PANL, GB2/1, Box 1774-92, Book 1774-79; Pringle to Officers of the Ordnance, St. John's, 17 October 1774.

permission to lease the rooms, although only to merchants and artisans directly involved in the fishery.<sup>40</sup>

To effect the leasing of ships' rooms, Duckworth ordered all buildings not directly used in the fish trade to be removed to a street set back from the waterfront area. People who moved received free land grants for their trouble. Others could lease land for their businesses. Artisans not immediately connected to trade began to petition for grants for shops and homes. In 1810, butcher John Mitchell requested that the governor rent him space to build a new shop as well as a furnace for rendering fat.<sup>41</sup> Saddler and harness maker Thomas Plumleigh asked for a similar lease to build a home and shop as he had "passed nearly the whole of last Winter without any Fire or a Chimney to make one in."<sup>42</sup> Carpenter George Sutton's complaint probably captured the rationale for these artisan petitions. Sutton could not earn a decent living from his trade in St. John's because of the high rent charged by owners of premises. The carpenter hoped that Duckworth would grant him permission to build a house in St. John's on a lease from the Crown.<sup>43</sup> A similar petition from gun and whitesmith Mark Coxson asked for a piece of land on which to build a workshop and home because the high rents charged by merchants for dwellings in the town made it impossible for him to earn a living for his family.<sup>44</sup>

Butcher Robert Brine, blockmaker William Branscomb and carpenter John Bray stood their ground on the waterfront, although an investigation by High Sheriff John Bland at Duckworth's request revealed that they encroached on ships' rooms as had many merchants.<sup>45</sup> On Duckworth's recommendation, the British Parliament passed an act in 1811 which provided for the alienation of fishing ships' rooms by lease, but would not recognize long-standing encroachments. Merchants organized opposition to the new leasing system, but when British authorities threatened to raise revenue by higher import duties, and the Americans declared war, merchants fell in behind the new act. Under the new law only merchants or others in the fish trade could lease ships rooms.<sup>46</sup>

The new act entrenched artisans below merchants in St. John's class structure. While government might allow an artisan like sailmaker John Juman to retain a shop in the waterfront area, others in trades not directly related to the fish trade had to give up their

---

40. Cadigan, "Rise of a Local Bourgeoisie."

41. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3716, f 1087; petition of John Mitchell to Duckworth, n.d. (but filed with Duckworth's 1810 correspondence).

42. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3716, f 1089; petition of Thomas Plumleigh to Duckworth, n.d. (but filed with 1810 correspondence).

43. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3716, f 1093-96; petition of George Sutton, 18 September 1810.

44. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3717, ff 1893-94; Coxson to Duckworth, St. John's, 20 September 1811.

45. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3717, f 1299; "Return of Erections complete, or in progress, with their uses. . . ." 25 October - 1 September 1810.

46. Cadigan, "Rise of a Local Bourgeoisie."

property.<sup>47</sup> Yet artisans continued to operate along the waterfront because there was no opposition to their subletting premises from merchants.<sup>48</sup> Merchant James Macbraire, for example, sublet to artisans. In addition to Robert Brine, between 1811 and 1814 Macbraire sublet premises he acquired under the 1811 act to a variety of labourers, shopkeepers, watchmakers, carpenters, and shoemakers.<sup>49</sup>

Faced with so many resource and legal obstacles, artisans with almost no local advantages gave up. Brewers Stout and Haire, for example, closed their brewery in 1810. Much more common were artisans who made their skills a subsidiary part of retailing. Sadler, collar and harness maker Thomas Plumleigh advertised for an apprentice to assist him in 1810, but did not actually produce his own goods. Plumleigh imported outfits for horses, and had diversified into selling whips and gigs. Shoemakers Kelland and Stacey similarly did not actually make footwear, but rather imported an “elegant assortment of Gentlemen’s Top, Hessian and Draw BOOTS, and an assortment of Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Dress SHOES.”<sup>50</sup>

Such artisanal-retail services suggests that artisans outside the building trades and the fishery met the needs of a local market dominated by St. John’s growing administrative-military officer establishment. Retailers such as restaurateur John Wilson supplied meals to St. John’s residents, but also produced jellies and pastries for local householders.<sup>51</sup> Mrs. Coats, a cook for Major-General Moore who was left behind by him when he returned to England, practised her trade by offering to supply St. John’s families with soups, jellies and prepared meals. Mrs. Hughes produced bodices for local ladies.<sup>52</sup> Kellond and Stacey advertised themselves, not as shoemakers for the common man, but rather as “Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Boot and Shoemakers.” They nonetheless did not make much, but rather imported goods for sale on cash or credit terms, adding a line of beaver hats and military liquid blacking in 1812. Painters and glaziers Roberts and Moore advertised that they specialized in furniture painting and gilding, as well as glazing, but could also paint houses, ships or signs. Tailors like Peter Burke and Matthew Quilty conducted their business in association with shop-keeping.<sup>53</sup>

People working in the fishery occasionally appear to have purchased goods directly from artisans. Fisherman Walter Walsh, for example, ordered a suit from tailor Michael Carrol in 1802, although he tried to refuse to take delivery when he decided to return

---

47. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3717, ff 1957-58; Bland to Duckworth, St. John’s, 29 September 1811.

48. Such subletting may not have been all bad; in New York similar leases gave artisans access to buildings they could not otherwise afford to build. See Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent*, 33-37.

49. PANL, MG 29, James Macbraire papers, Files 26-31.

50. *The Royal Gazette*, 14 June, 16 August 1810; 30 July 1812.

51. *The Royal Gazette*, 23 July 1812. Mrs. Wilson carried on the business after the death of John in 1814. See *The Royal Gazette*, 13 January 1814.

52. *The Royal Gazette*, 16 July 1812.

53. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John’s, 10 January 1810; 2 January, 2, 16 July 1812; 11 May 1815.

home to Ireland.<sup>54</sup> Military officers, however, were probably the most important customers for local artisans. The military paid cash to their men and employees. This payroll constituted almost the sole source of circulating medium by which St. John's residents could pay artisans.<sup>55</sup> Military officers established accounts with local tradespeople, paying them off when their tour of duty in the town ended. Butcher Robert Brine, for example, supplied Lieutenant-Colonel Molesworth with credit for the latter's purchases in 1804.<sup>56</sup>

Government officials and merchants, in addition to military officers, were important customers for artisans outside of the marine trades. Cabinet-maker Mark Green advertised that his most important customers were merchants. Hairdressers and barbers probably met the needs of the St. John's administrative and mercantile elite. Andrew M'Coubrey, for example, advertised himself as a "Ladies' and Gentlemen's Fashionable Hair-Cutter, and Fancy Wig Maker."<sup>57</sup>

There are a few intriguing instances of artisans attempting import substitution by bringing in raw materials for local manufacture. Jacob Goff, for example, operated a biscuit bakehouse in St. John's in 1810. He offered for sale fresh pilot bread and biscuit, for which he would take flour in exchange. Given the lack of grain cultivation in St. John's, it is safe to assume that Goff wanted to supply merchants with a locally-manufactured good in exchange for the raw materials his production required. Mr. Goff did not advertise again, but in 1815 an advertisement appeared in a St. John's newspaper indicating that someone was willing to pay "Liberal Wages" to one or two biscuit makers. Baking in St. John's might have been directed at supplying the fishery and trade. In 1815, for example, James Withers, advertised for the hire of a person who understood how to bake hard bread, a staple of fishermen's and seamen's diets.<sup>58</sup>

James Furneaux advertised that he would continue to take orders as a boot and shoemaker, although no longer in partnership with John Foote and Sons. Saddle and harness maker Andrew Hume did not advertise imports for sale, but rather only his services. George Winter offered locally moulded and dipped candles "of any size and quantity warranted equal to any imported" in 1814. Winter had competition from James Withers who had established a chandlery in St. John's. By 1815 butcher John Mitchell operated a chandlery as well, advertising not only candles, but offering them at discount prices to wholesale purchasers.<sup>59</sup>

54. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; Michael Carrol vs. Walter Walsh, £5.1.0, 26 November 1802.

55. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; Chief Justice Thomas Tremlett et al. to Governor Gower, St. John's, 14 September 1804.

56. PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Box 1, Book 1803-1807; Brine vs. Molewoth for £15.5.4 balance of account, 17 December 1804. The court decided for Brine.

57. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 11 May, 13 July 1815.

58. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 19 May 1810; 2 March, 25 May 1815.

59. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 4 February 1813; 6 January, 15 December 1814; 26 January 1815.

**Table 1**  
**Average Permanent Population of St. John's**  
**District by Decade, 1740s-1810s**

<b>Decade</b>	<b>St. John's Average Perm. Pop.</b>	<b>Total Average Perm. Pop., Nfld.*</b>	<b>St. John's as % of Total APP</b>
1740s	440	2,176	20
1750s	786	3,513	22
1760s	808	4,887	17
1770s	1,103	6,584	17
1780s	1,446	8,630	17
1790s	2,278	11,624	20
1800s	4,519	17,264	26
1810s	7,775	27,888	28

\*excludes St. Pierre (ceded to France in 1764)

Source: Hancock, *So longe as there comes noe women*, 102

**Table 2**  
**Household Head Occupations, St. John's, 1794-95**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage of all Households</b>
fishermen/shoremen	295	50
artisans	119	20
merchants	41	7
publicans/shopkeepers	31	5
service*	31	5
planters/boatkeepers/ mariners	14	2
government	6	1
others**	4	1
unknown <sup>+</sup>	50	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>99%</b>

\* includes clergy, teachers, doctors, midwives, scribes, gardeners, commissaries, washerwomen, cookroom keepers, accountants

\*\* includes 1 gentleman, 1 fiddler, 2 labourers

<sup>+</sup> includes 31 women (of whom 18 were widows)

Source: PANL, GN2/39/A, Census of St. John's, 1794-95

ARTISANS IN A MERCHANT TOWN

**Table 3**  
**Artisan Households by Occupations, St. John's, 1794-95**

Maritime			Non-Maritime		
Occupation	#	% of all all Maritime	Occupation	#	% of all Non-Maritime
cooper ship	18	60	carpenter	35	39
carpenter	6	20	mason	3	3
sailmaker	4	13	glazier	1	1
blockmaker	2	7	smith	10	11
			tailor	18	20
			shoemaker	7	8
			baker	4	5
			butcher	4	5
			barber	3	3
			watchmaker	3	3
			armourer	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>89</b>	<b>99%</b>

Source: PANL, GN2/39/A, Census of St. John's, 1794-95

**Table 4**  
**Owners of More than 4 Houses, St. John's, 1794-95**

Occupation	Number	Percentage	# of Hhds. owned	% of 382
absentee	19	45	165	43
merchant	10	24	94	25
artisan	3	7	24	6
publican/ shopkeeper	2	5	29	8
service	2	5	11	3
government	2	5	16	4
planter	1	2	18	5
gentleman	1	2	7	2
unknown	2	5	18	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>101%</b>

Source: PANL, GN2/39/A, Census of St. John's, 1794-95

**Table 5**  
**Occupations of the St. John's Loyal Volunteers, 1806, 1809-10**

1806			1809-10		
Occupation	#	% of total	Occupation	#	% of total
artisans	154	59	artisans	59	61
fishermen	26	10	fishermen	12	13
merchants	9	3	merchants	12	13
boatkeepers	8	3			
shopkeepers/ publicans	9	3	publicans	4	4
service*	46	17	service*	6	6
other <sup>+</sup>	6	2	other <sup>+</sup>	2	2
unknown	5	2	government	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>99%</b>		<b>96</b>	<b>100%</b>

\* includes surgeon, usher, teachers, notary public, accountants

<sup>+</sup> includes labourers (5 in 1806) and farmers (2 in 1809-10)

Source: CO 194, vol. 45, 1806, B-681, ff 147-8; vol. 50, 1811, B-683, ff 132-36

**Table 6**  
**Occupations of Artisans in the St. John's Volunteers, 1806**

Maritime			Non-Maritime		
Occupation	#	% of all Maritime	Occupation	#	% of all Non-Maritime
cooper	25	61	carpenter	47	42
sailmaker	6	15	tailor	20	18
blockmaker	4	10	shoemaker	17	15
shipwright	3	7	mason	9	8
shipcarpenter	2	5	baker	5	4
fish culler	1	2	watchmaker	4	4
			butcher	4	4
			barber	2	2
			wheelwright	1	1
			tinman	1	1
			carter	1	1
			brewer	1	1
			gunmaker	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>113</b>	<b>102%</b>

Source: CO 194, vol. 45, 1806, B-681, ff 147-48

ARTISANS IN A MERCHANT TOWN

**Table 7**  
**Occupations of Artisans in St. John's Volunteers, 1809-10**

Maritime			Non-Maritime		
Occupation	#	% of all Maritime	Occupation	#	% of all Non-Maritime
cooper	7	41	carpenter	14	33
sailmaker	7	41	shoemaker	10	24
blockmaker	2	12	tailor	8	19
pilot	1	6	mason	3	7
			watchmaker	2	5
			baker	1	2
			tinker	1	2
			drayman	1	2
			gunsmith	1	2
			barber	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>42</b>	<b>98%</b>

Source: CO 194, vol. 50, 1811, B-683, ff 132-36

**Table 8**  
**Occupation of Insolvents, St. John's, 1815-16**

Occupation	Number	Percentage of all Insolvents
artisans	22	28
planters/boatkeepers	16	20
dealers/chapmen	12	15
merchants	12	15
publicans/shopkeepers	11	14
farmers	3	4
unknown	3	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Surrogate Court Minutes, Box 1

**Table 9**  
**Occupations of Insolvent Artisans, St. John's, 1815-16**

Maritime			Non-Maritime		
Occupation	#	% of all Maritime	Occupation	#	% of all Non-Maritime
shipcarpenter	2	75	tailor	6	33
sailmaker	1	25	carpenter	4	22
cooper	1	25	baker	3	17
			shoemaker	2	11
			butcher	1	6
			mason	1	6
			mangler	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>18</b>	<b>101%</b>

Source: PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Surrogate Court Minutes, Box 1

## ARTISANS IN A MERCHANT TOWN

The most successful careers were pursued by artisans who used their retail and trading activities as pathways to mercantile careers, eventually abandoning their crafts altogether. This was an early trend. One of the watchmakers listed in the 1794-95 census was Luke Maddock. Maddock left watchmaking for a small import business, bringing provisions from Waterford and manufactures from Liverpool on board English vessels to supply Irish Catholic planters, artisans and servants at St. John's.<sup>60</sup> Maddock, who was also a shopkeeper, tavernkeeper, and landlord, may have become a merchant in a way similar to Benjamin Bowring. In 1815 Bowring settled in St. John's as a "Working Watch-maker, Silversmith, and Jeweller" who imported silver and gold watches for sale.<sup>61</sup> His wife operated a dry-goods store attached to his shop. This store's success led Bowring to leave watchmaking for retailing dry goods and manufactures he imported from England. From there Bowring expanded into the cod and seal trade.<sup>62</sup>

St. John's artisans who produced consumer goods appear to have been the occupational group most likely to become merchants. Artisans in other North American cities often imported and retailed finished goods and then concentrated on servicing such goods to build a clientele.<sup>63</sup> A watchmaker like Bowring, for example, might bring in fine watches, establish a good reputation by well repairing them, and thus create consumer confidence in his own products as well. If such artisans could find cheap local supplies of inputs, then they could expand their enterprise through more local manufacture. A tailor who could find local supplies of textiles, for example, might well have concentrated on local manufacturing rather than importing.

The Newfoundland economy generated few inputs for the manufacture of anything outside of salt cod, cod oil, and seal oil. As a result, artisans who acquired knowledge of accounting and trading and wanted to expand their field of capital accumulation had to move in the direction of trading rather than manufacture. The career of tailor Thomas Meagher is a case in point. Meagher was a Tipperary emigrant farmer who apprenticed in St. John's in the 1780s. While little is known about how typical Meagher's background was compared to other artisans, he seemed to have no unusual status or kinship support which ensured his later success as a merchant. Instead, Meagher's occupation was important. Tailors, like other producers of consumer goods, required little start-up capital. His skill and reputation among his customers were Meagher's greatest assets. Ethnicity was undoubtedly important in the latter; Meagher tended to serve a largely Irish Catholic clientele.

---

60. Maddock's career is described by John Mannion in His biography of "Morris, Patrick," *DCB: VII, 1836-1850* (Toronto 1988), 626.

61. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 14 September 1815.

62. Melvin Baker, "Bowring, Benjamin," *DCB: VII, 1836 to 1850* (Toronto 1988), 101-102.

63. See Olton, *Artisans for Independence*, 11-25; and Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (New York and London 1986), 45-56.

Such ethnic loyalty between artisans, merchants, and their customers was probably not unique to the Irish (English artisans could well have served English customers) but the Irish were the largest immigrant group in Newfoundland during the Napoleonic era, and this certainly did not hurt Meagher's prospects. His enterprise evolved quickly into a mercantile career as Meagher imported cloth from British suppliers to work into clothing in exchange for fish and oil from his customers. To facilitate his trade Meagher acquired a sixty-ton brig; and by 1811 he worked full-time as a merchant. As a merchant and landlord, Meagher achieved both wealth and prestige both in St. John's and at home in Ireland. While one might term Meagher "middle class" in the context of the great port-city merchants and aristocrats of Great Britain, he was certainly, in St. John's, a member of a new, dynamic bourgeoisie. In fact, "middle class" is too imprecise a term to describe Meagher's place in the St. John's economy. Regardless of his wealth, friends, or status, Meagher had made the transition from artisan to mercantile capitalist. As a merchant, he no longer independently produced commodities, but rather hired labour to work his stores, shops, and ships to carry goods in an import, export and retail trade.<sup>64</sup>

Butchering was another consumer trade well-suited to individual artisans' ascent to merchant status. Merchants often became involved in the beef trade by importing young cattle for fattening on local farms and then selling them for slaughter in St. John's. In August 1802, for example, merchants William Elmes and Richard Reed contracted with William Walsh of Outer Cove, a rural community to the northeast of St. John's, to care for 28 oxen they had imported until they were ready for sale in November.<sup>65</sup> The increase in circulating medium in St. John's associated with a larger military establishment appears to have encouraged smaller producers to become involved in the direct import of goods like cattle from Cape Breton independent of the credit of larger merchants like Elmes or Reed.<sup>66</sup>

Military contracts were crucial to the success of butcher Robert Brine. Of protestant English West Country stock, Brine began his trade in the small community of Quidi Vidi to the north of St. John's. By 1808 Brine and his brother John were established in St. John's, and seeking to expand their business by obtaining contracts to supply army and navy personnel in the town and port with fresh beef. The Brines owned schooners which they used to bring cattle from Nova Scotia.<sup>67</sup> By 1811 the Brines also imported

- 
64. John Mannion, "Meagher, Thomas," *DCB: VII, 1836 to 1850* (Toronto 1988), 597-98; and "Migration and Upward Mobility: The Meagher Family in Ireland and Newfoundland, 1780-1830," *Irish Economic and Social History*, XV (1988): 54-70. For an attempt to make "middle class" an analytical concept by redefining urban American capitalists as either a "business class" or "mercantile elite" see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge, 1989), 35-65, 135-37.
65. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; William Walsh vs. William Elmes and Richard Reed, £52.10.0, 4 December 1802.
66. PANL, GN5/2/A/1, Box 1, Book 1798-1802; Chief Justice Thomas Tremlett to Governor Gower, St. John's, 14 September 1804.
67. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3719, ff 4841-2; John and Robert Brine to Governor

fresh vegetables for the troops.<sup>68</sup> The Brines beat out John Williams, their main competitor for military contracts, because they traded with Nova Scotian and Prince Edward Island suppliers while Williams traded with New Englanders — and lost his supplies with the passage of the Nonintercourse Bill as tensions heightened with the United States.<sup>69</sup> The Brines had developed a passenger trade on their schooners which travelled to Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton for cattle.<sup>70</sup> The Brines continued to ply their butchers' trade for a while, supplying the public and regular customers with fresh meat from a shop at the Public Cove at the foot of Church Hill.<sup>71</sup> The success of their butchers' business led the Brines into greater mercantile activity. In 1816 they established new stores in St. John's from which they advertised for sale salt, provisions, casks, construction, and shipbuilding materials.<sup>72</sup>

In 1815 peace brought an end to prosperity in the Newfoundland fishery. Depression set in as fish prices fell due to renewed competition from the Americans and French. Judicial officials reported an unprecedented increase in insolvencies from 1815 to 1816. While employers and servants in the outport fishery faced the most severe hardships, St. John's did not remain unaffected.<sup>73</sup> Artisans formed the largest number of insolvents of any occupational group in the two-year period, followed closely by planters and boatkeepers in the fishery, small traders (dealers and chapmen), and then larger merchants [see Table 8]. Non-maritime trades constituted 82 per cent of all artisan insolvencies. This reflects non-maritime artisans' greater tendency to establish independent households in the port [see Table 9]. The limit of import-substituting manufacture in St. John's is perhaps best revealed by the way in which the post-war depression saw baker James Withers become insolvent, while Robert Brine began to supply the port with pilot bread from Nova Scotia.<sup>74</sup>

---

Duckworth, St. John's, 9 August 1811.

68. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, M-3719, ff. 4864-66, John and Robert Brine to Duckworth, St. John's, 18 August 1811.

69. PANL, MG 204, Duckworth Papers, MG 204, M-3719, f 4837; Williams to Captain John Coaksley, St. John's, 11 May 1811; f 4770. Robert Brine had formerly been Williams' partner; little is known about the circumstances surrounding the break-up of that partnership.

70. PANL, GB2/1, Box 1805-14, Book 1812-14; Captain E.M. Durnford to R.H. Crew, St. John's, 2 May 1812.

71. *The Royal Gazette*, 3 January 1811.

72. *The Mercantile Journal*, St. John's, 28 September 1816.

73. On the general depression see Matthews, *Lectures*, 142-48; for specific effects on fishing people see Sean T. Cadigan, "Economic and Social Relations of Production on the Northeast-Coast of Newfoundland, with Special Reference to Conception Bay, 1785-1855," (PhD. diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland), 1991, chs. 3-4.

74. On Withers' insolvency see PANL, GN5/1/A/1, Box 1, Minutes January-June 1816; on Brine see his *Mercantile Journal* advertisement, 28 September 1816. While war seriously disrupted Nova Scotian agricultural production, baking in Halifax was well established by the mid-nineteenth century, and probably enjoyed greater advantages than in St. John's because of closer proximity to both local and continental supplies of flour. It took no great mercantile innovation for Brine to find Maritime sources of pilot bread already being supplied to the West

Artisans in St. John's may not have suffered to a greater extent in the post-1815 depression because of the nature of their business. The port continued to attract naval and army personnel, as well as merchants and shipmasters, all of whom undoubtedly purchased goods and services in the local economy. St. John's was now well-established as the administrative capital of an all-but-in-name colony. The military and administrative bureaucracy, as well as metropolitan merchants, meant that St. John's continued to have ladies and gentlemen with appearances to keep and parties to attend. Such would continue to need their cabinets, sofas, hats, bodices, watches, fancy boots and shoes, gigs, whigs, and whips.<sup>75</sup>

As in Halifax, war proved to be a major catalyst for change in the economic and social structure of St. John's, establishing the conditions whereby a significant artisan element contributed to the limited economic diversification of what was otherwise a merchant town.<sup>76</sup> St. John's nonetheless remained largely dependent on the fishery and British protection from American competition. Imperial protection meant the further fortification of St. John's, and military expenditures brought artisans in the building trades. That these building-trades artisans, especially carpenters, were the only ones to hire many journeymen or unskilled labourers suggests that only the building trades experienced the development of anything like industrial-capitalist relations between 1775 and 1816. The growth of a market of military officers, further added to by government officialdom, stimulated some further artisanal development outside the building trades. The exclusion of New England merchants and the strength of the fishery after the Revolution, continued to see St. John's develop as a metropolitan centre in the fishery. More government and more trade provided further opportunities not only for maritime artisans, but for greater numbers of non-maritime artisans. The wars with the French to 1815 accelerated artisan development as they did the fishery.

Post-1815 depression struck hard at St. John's artisans and probably reinforced a tendency on the part of those outside the building trades to rely less on their own manufacture. More than anything else, these other non-maritime artisans served an upper-class clientele with luxury goods. Many artisans appear to have functioned

---

Indies trade to bring to Newfoundland along with livestock, vegetables and lumber. On Nova Scotian agriculture see Julian Gwyn, "Economic Fluctuations in Wartime Nova Scotia, 1755-1815," in Margaret Conrad, ed., *Making Adjustments: Change and Continuity in Planter Nova Scotia* (Fredericton, 1991), 60-88. The growing importance of Cape Breton, eastern Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island to supplying St. John's with agricultural products in this period is most recently discussed in Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth-Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montreal and Kingston, 1992), 59-60. For a later examination of the Halifax baking industry see Ian McKay, "Capital and Labour in the Halifax Baking and Confectionary Industry During the Last Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978): 63-108.

75. *The Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 31 August 1815; 27 August 1816.

76. On the importance of war to Nova Scotia's economic development see Gwyn, "Economic Fluctuations," 60-88.

## ARTISANS IN A MERCHANT TOWN

primarily as retailers, using their skills in a decidedly secondary manner to service commodities sold to St. John's military-bureaucrat-mercantile elite. There were artisans, notably bakers and butchers, who attempted import substitution, but they had to contend with the lack of available local inputs and a legal infrastructure which favoured merchant property rights. Economic success for some of these artisans lay in building on their trading skills to become merchants themselves. Such artisans followed a path which cannot be understood by looking back from the perspective of later industrial capitalist development. This St. John's example suggests that, for at least some artisans in British North America, career advance and capital accumulation were built on trade rather than on manufacture.