

History Project – Research Report
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“The Impact of the French Revolutionary Period on Communication Patterns Among
Mercantile Networks in the British and French Atlantic World, c.1763-1804”

The postal system was an integral means by which colonial communication networks operated among and between the British Empire and French overseas empire during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. My project examines the operation of the letter post system in terms of how information and news circulated in select British and French Caribbean colonies from 1763 to 1804 and how the French Revolutionary Wars impacted these processes. It aims to add to the existing scholarship on communication networks established across the Atlantic Ocean during this period, which has focused on either the pre-revolutionary or revolutionary era of the late 18th century and not the transitional period in between.¹ Specifically, my project looks at the correspondence networks of select social groups, such as merchants, colonial officials, and naval personnel, all of whom were in communication with one another on a regular basis. With regard to the first group, scholarship on communication networks among 18th century British and French Caribbean merchants is a largely underexplored area of study compared to similar scholarship for those in America and Europe.²

¹ See: Ian Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675 – 1740* (New York, 1986); Kenneth Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montréal, 2002).

² For works that examine mercantile communication networks in early America and Europe, see: Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2012); Cathy Matson, *Merchants & Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Pierre Gervais, et al. (eds.), *Merchants and Profit in the Age of Commerce, 1680-1830* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014); Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen 1650-1775* (London: Methuen, 1998); Greg H. Williams, *The French Assault on American Shipping, 1793-1813: A History and Comprehensive Record of Merchant Marine Losses* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009); Renaud Morieux, *The Channel: England, France and the Construction of a Maritime Border in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Merchants were important historical actors in the operation of communication networks across the Atlantic world more widely, especially with regard to the establishment and maintenance of the letter post system. They depended on effective mailing systems as they were in frequent correspondence with business partners on both sides of the ocean and beyond. Merchants often commented on social and political conditions in the Caribbean that hindered and / or benefited their economic enterprises, particularly concerning the issue of ordinances and any event or problem that may lead to sociopolitical unrest. Obtaining the latest information was also important to merchants with regard to market prices for commodities, especially sugar and coffee, which were needed in order to carry out their various business transactions.

Despite mercantile dependence on swift and effective mailing services, such practices in the British Caribbean originated as an irregular service carried out by travelers or shipmasters headed overseas, with urgent government and military dispatches sent by warships.³ This changed in 1755 when the United Kingdom established a government-moderated postal packet service to provide a more regularized service between Falmouth, UK and the Caribbean islands. While this service was somewhat successful in subsequent years, it was eventually hindered by the arrival of a long series of wars including the Seven Years' War (1756-63), the American Revolutionary War (1775-83), and the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802). During these conflicts, mail packet boats were taken by enemy ships, seized by pirates, or lost altogether in battle.

These difficulties were not exclusive to the British islands, as the French Caribbean also experienced similar setbacks in establishing their own government-

³ L.E. Britnor, *The History of the Sailing Packets to the West Indies* (London: British West Indies Study Circle, 1973), pp. 6, 17.

moderated postal service. However, among the primary causes of these setbacks were the bureaucratic barriers related to the role of merchants in distributing mails. Given the importance of effective communications to the survival of their varied business ventures, merchants created their own postal systems to collect and distribute mails to not only facilitate the operation of their commercial activities, but to also make side money distributing mails for customers wishing to use their services to send correspondence abroad. As such, the merchants' valuable and lucrative mail delivery capabilities garnered the ire of the French state, particularly the colonial administrators who had a difficult time supervising the merchants' operations and efficiently taxing their postal enterprises in times when they had high volume traffic. Furthermore, the metropolitan and colonial merchants started voicing their criticisms of the state regarding taxation, and made many attempts to evade the supervision of the French government altogether.⁴

The Chief Minister of the King, Étienne François, duc de Choiseul (b. 1719 - d. 1785), took notice of the merchants' actions, and quickly developed a deep-rooted distrust of them. This displeasure only contributed to his efforts to deflect any proposals for a regularized postal system, which many French merchants lobbied for in order to facilitate their business ventures in the Caribbean colonies. For example, in Martinique, there were attempts in 1701, 1738 and 1752 to establish a regularized postal system, but all three times these applications were rejected. After a further two false starts in 1762 and 1765, Martinique finally saw a regularized service in 1766.⁵ When the French colonies did receive a regular postal system, it, like that of the British, was subject to a

⁴ Kenneth Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 183.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

string of complications resultant of the revolutionary wars that rattled the Atlantic world in the subsequent decade.

Thanks to the generous financial support of the Joint Centre for History and Economics and the History Project, I was able to conduct research into this area of study in order to understand the extent to which these revolutionary wars facilitated or hindered the movement of mails and information among mercantile circles in the British and French Caribbean. Specifically, their funding helped cover the transportation and accommodation costs associated with carrying out archival research at the Archives nationales and the Archives nationales-d'outre-mer in Paris and Aix-en-Provence, France respectively. In visiting these archives, I was able to gain access to many sources that delve into the operation of communication systems established among and between the British and French Caribbean colonies during the 18th century. Firstly, I examined several collections of correspondence records belonging to sugar, coffee, and tobacco merchants in the French islands of Martinique and Saint-Domingue, which revealed interesting information regarding the difficult realities of transporting mails both across the Atlantic Ocean and among the different French, British and Spanish colonies. Some of these sources illustrated how inclement weather played a significant role in delaying the arrival and departure of mail packet boats throughout the 18th century, which in turn prevented merchants' letters from reaching the corresponding addressees on time, if at all. These records describe in detail the headaches that merchants faced in terms of finding alternative arrangements to send their correspondences, such as ships located at ports of call in other islands.

Another major detriment to the distribution of mails was the interception or destruction of the mail packet boats during wartime. To address this issue, I examined cargo lists, bills of sale, inventory lists, prices current, and other correspondence packages so as to understand to what extent the revolutionary wars between Britain and France impacted the distribution of mails, as well as merchants' profits, where applicable. In doing so, this information has provided a clearer image of how information was passed along during the 18th century, and the lengths to which merchants went to protect their business enterprises. While the synthesis of these sources is still underway, the months of archival work carried out in France has been invaluable to my overall project and will greatly inform future research into how state control of information exchange was both exercised and subverted in the colonies. These findings would not have been possible without the financial support of the Joint Centre for History and Economics and the History Project and as such, I look forward to acknowledging their assistance in all future publications that derive from this research.