Networks in Favor of Liberty: St Eustatius as an Entrepôt of Goods and Information during the American Revolution

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Networks in Favor of Liberty:
St. Eustatius as an Entrepôt of Goods and Information during the American Revolution

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ABSTRACT

As a free port situated in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean, the Dutch colony of St. Eustatius prospered as an entrepôt in the late eighteenth century. At its height, this tiny island of eight square miles welcomed an average of eight ships per day into its roadstead. The lucrative exchange of both goods and information on the island proved essential to America's prosecution of the Revolutionary War. Drawing on expansive commercial networks which linked the United States to Europe via the Caribbean, Congress secured greatly needed military stores for the Continental forces. As evidenced in part by the sizable network of Philadelphia businessman Robert Morris, these commercial contacts supplied the arms and ammunition necessary to prevent the early defeat of Washington's army. The channels opened by St. Eustatius also facilitated diplomatic communication between America and potential European supporters as indicated by the efforts of Charles Dumas, Congress' advocate at The Hague. His reports allowed the United States to monitor the volatile relationship between Britain and the Dutch Republic while providing Congress a means to promote the American cause in Europe.

Commercial disputes between Britain and the Dutch Republic culminated with the sack of St. Eustatius by Admiral George Rodney in 1781. Papers seized from resident merchants illustrate the nature and extent of the island's trade network. The perspective of a British businessman, Richard Downing Jennings, provides further evidence of advantageous connections by showing St. Eustatius was a nucleus of an international information exchange. As an intermediary between the United States and Europe, St. Eustatius and the greater Caribbean proved to be essential to American independence. The goods and intelligence procured through its networks enabled the United States to prolong and expand the war against Britain.
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On November 16, 1776, the guns of Fort Oranje on the Dutch island of St. Eustatius fired nine blank shots in a customary response to a salute from a foreign ship. On this occasion, the vessel entering the roadstead was the American brig *Andrew Doria*. While Americans were common in Caribbean waters, this ship was among the first to proudly fly the new red and white striped flag of the Continental Congress.¹ According to a contemporary, the fort had welcomed the *Andrew Doria* "with the Solemnity due to the Flags of Independent Sovereign States."² In effect, the salute constituted the first foreign recognition of the United States of America.

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¹ "American" is used as a descriptor both by and for the residents of the United States in the primary source material that forms the basis of this paper. This is a very narrow definition of the term, as "American" is used as an identifier by people of both North and South America.

As Americans on the island celebrated the reception of the *Andrew Doria*, and the copy of the Declaration of Independence she carried, British observers immediately denounced the fort’s actions. In a letter to Johannes de Graaff, governor of St. Eustatius, the vice-admiral of the British Leeward Islands station wrote “It is with equal surprize and astonishment, I daily hear it asserted in the most positive manner, that the port of St. Eustatia has for some time past been openly and avowedly declared protector of all Americans and their vessels. Colours and forts of their High Mightinesses have been so far debased as to return the salutes of these pirates and rebels; that the subjects of the States [are] not satisfied with giving all manner of assistance to the American rebels of arms, ammunition, and whatever else may enable them to annoy and disturb the trade of His Brittannic Majesty’s loyal and faithful subjects.” In establishing the link between the perceived acknowledgement of American sovereignty and participation in the trade of warlike supplies, the letter openly questions the governor’s motive in authorizing the return salute.

Dissatisfied with the governor’s evasive explanations on this point and angered by his additional displays of support for the American cause, Britain demanded action from Dutch authorities in Europe. After much prevaricating, the West India Company recalled de Graaff for questioning in 1778. In front of the board, de Graaff defended the salute to the *Andrew Doria* as a ritual courtesy extended to all visiting vessels, regardless of nationality. When asked whether or not he had recognized the flag as that of the Continental Congress, de Graaff answered with a question of his own: how could anyone

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3 James Young to Johannes de Graaff, 14 December 1776, in *NDAR* v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 487.
prove he had known its origin?\textsuperscript{4} Steering the conversation away from the actions of the fort, de Graaff instead cited several instances of British interference in Dutch trade. St. Eustatius was sustained by commerce and, as a neutral port, welcomed the vessels of all nations. Having responded to Britain’s demand for action, the officials returned de Graaff to his post.

Left unsaid in the proceedings was the acknowledgement that establishing rapport with the Americans ensured that St. Eustatius would continue to attract and maintain valuable customers. Owing to the island’s proximity to mainland ports, gunpowder sold for approximately five and a half times the amount that it could be acquired for in Europe.\textsuperscript{5} De Graaff understandably sought to protect this lucrative business, which supplied the island’s marketplace with coveted American products including tobacco, indigo, and lumber. As alluded to in the governor’s testimony, the concept of “free ships, free goods” (outlined in an Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1668 and reconfirmed in 1674) allowed a neutral nation to maintain trade with a belligerent so long as a military disadvantage was not imposed on the other side. British officials would counter this oft made assertion with the equally pertinent claim that international custom allowed a belligerent to obstruct trade which provided the enemy with warlike stores. This contradiction in international relations was a central source of friction between Britain and the Dutch Republic in the late eighteenth century. In the five years following the fort’s salute to the Andrew Doria, tension between the two would increase and culminate in armed conflict.

As the Dutch Republic entered the war against Britain during the final stage of the Revolution and never concluded a formal alliance with Congress, its contributions to the

\textsuperscript{5} Tuchman, First Salute, 20.
American victory are often overshadowed by those of France. Consequently, the role of
St. Eustatius as an entrepôt and the effects of the overarching commercial dispute have
received little attention from American historians. Among the few works to address the
island beyond a few lines is *The First Salute: a View of the American Revolution* by
Barbara Tuchman. Writing for a general audience, she effectively uses the intriguing
operation at St. Eustatius as a hook to draw readers into a narrative on Anglo-Dutch
relations and the international dimensions of the Revolutionary War. While Tuchman
successfully illustrates the importance of the island as a vital source of supplies for
America, her larger analysis suffers from Euro-centrism. In effect, the emphasis on
European actors and motivations downplays American agency in the outcome of the
conflict. In order to offer a more complete assessment, this thesis will explore American
modes of procuring much-needed goods through St. Eustatius as well as the ways in
which Congress acted on deteriorating Anglo-Dutch relations.

Building on Tuchman’s description of St. Eustatius as an economic entrepôt, this
thesis will also address the island as a hub of information and examine the diplomatic use
of correspondence passing through the port en route to destinations on both sides of the
Atlantic. It will make that argument that communication between America and Europe
was facilitated by commercial networks which linked American agents with their
international counterparts in the Caribbean and to contacts in Europe. These connections
not only provided supplies, but proved essential to Congress’ efforts to secure European
support.

Without the Caribbean to serve as an intermediary, an American victory in the
Revolutionary War would not have been possible. The substantial quantity of military
stores and diplomatic intelligence procured through unofficial commercial alliances sustained the Continental forces and enabled Congress to maintain advantageous communication with potential backers in Europe. The United States' profitable use and expansion of these international networks also served to compound tension between Britain and neutral powers, ultimately leading France (along with Spain, by association) and the Dutch Republic into the war. St. Eustatius was a particularly important Caribbean port, its neutrality and tradition of free trade making it an entrepôt for a majority of the war. As a primary hub of exchange, the island prevented the early defeat of a weak American military and, following the alliance of 1777, a safe port for the French. Commercial disputes between Britain and the Dutch Republic often centered on the activities of St. Eustatius' merchants and their contacts, aggravating existing tension to the point of war. In prolonging and expanding the conflict, St. Eustatius was essential to securing the independence of the United States.

With the events transpiring on St. Eustatius in November 1776 serving to introduce international interest in the island, this paper will explore the use and effect of networks from three perspectives. The standpoint of the American mainland will open with a brief exploration of its prior connections with St. Eustatius. Links indicated by early-eighteenth-century commercial records support the likely possibility that Congress drew on pre-existing networks during the Revolution. The commercial contacts of the prosperous merchant Robert Morris will demonstrate the reach and use of such systems during the war. Correspondence linking Morris, his agents, and Congress evidences the importance of connections in procuring supplies.
The following section will analyze the use of networks from the perspective of an agent in Europe. Charles Dumas, a resident of the Dutch Republic, greatly benefited from the transatlantic communication system in rallying support for the American cause. His correspondence indicates the importance of receiving timely updates from America. Furthermore, Dumas’ return reports allowed the United States to monitor the volatile relationship between Britain and the Dutch Republic, a conflict which Congress was able to act on to its advantage.

The concluding discussion addresses the sack of St. Eustatius, which occurred immediately after Britain declared war against the Dutch Republic in 1781. Papers seized from merchants illuminate the intricacies of business operations and reinforce the island’s centrality to the information network. The perspective of one British businessman on St. Eustatius, Richard Downing Jennings, contributes additional insight on the universal utility of the island. An analysis of his 1784 pamphlet, written in protest of the confiscation of his property, shows that Britain also stood to profit from the island’s intelligence networks. Descriptions of the accessibility of strategic information, which Jennings offered to share with the British, exemplify the significance of the island’s connections and further strengthens the case that St. Eustatius was the nucleus of international exchange.
America’s Links with St. Eustatius and the Wider Caribbean

The salute to the Andrew Doria was only one of many occurrences which drew St. Eustatius deeper into the war between Britain and her former colonies. Days after the ship’s arrival, Governor de Graaff again found himself having to defend his decision of open support and recognition of the American cause. On November 21, 1776, the American privateer Baltimore Hero captured the British merchant vessel, May, off the coast of St. Eustatius. Sailing out of St. Kitts, the May was seized within sight of both islands. A prize crew was put onboard and instructed to make for Delaware, where the ship and cargo would be condemned by a prize court. Following the engagement, the privateer was welcomed back into the roadstead of St. Eustatius, were it received “every mark of support and protection.”

At the insistence of the British owner, a formal complaint was lodged against de Graaff by the governor of St. Kitts, Craister Greathead. The complaint took the form of a haughty memorial in which Greathead insisted on an explanation as well as demanded restitution for the owner of the May and the “condign punishment” of the American “partners, sharers and abettors.” This letter strongly suggests that the protection of the Baltimore Hero significantly compounded the affront perceived in the island’s official recognition of the Andrew Doria. These back to back episodes posed a threat to the long established goodwill between the Dutch Republic and Britain. As Greathead informs de Graaff, “it must be evident to you, Sir, that a partiality & conduct similar to the one herein complained of even in favour of a sovereign state in amity with the States General,

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7 Greathead to de Graaff, 17 December 1776, in NDAR v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 507-508.
but enmity with Great Britain, would be a flagrant violation of the many compacts now existing between our two courts."\textsuperscript{8}

The public recognition and protection of American vessels at St. Eustatius conveyed a clear message to America and Britain alike: the Dutch were willing partners with America in the Caribbean and a potential ally of the United States in Europe. As the British responded with additional memorials and the filing of complaints, Americans directed their attention to making use of this perceived friendship. Abraham van Bibber, a prosperous merchant on St. Eustatius, noted that "all American vessels here now were [wear] the Congress colors. Tories sneak and shrink before the honest & brave Americans here."\textsuperscript{9} Likewise emboldened, Congressional commissioners in the United States increasingly instructed captains bound for the West Indies to salute the fort at all ports of call and to visit with island governors.\textsuperscript{10} By encouraging recognition of the American flag, the United States hoped to legitimize its claim to sovereignty and press others into displaying support. Increased communication with island governors would strengthen a network of contacts vital to the flow of goods and information to and from the United States.

Occurring alongside a formal investigation into the salute to the \textit{Andrew Doria}, which involved collecting depositions from multiple observers, the inquiry into the capture of the \textit{May} was drawn out over several months as officials argued over the rights and respect due to their respective nations. An examination of the case reveals a strong link between Governor de Graaff and the American merchants on St. Eustatius. A

\textsuperscript{8} Greathead to de Graaff, 17 December 1776, in NDAR v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 507-508.
\textsuperscript{10} Robert Morris to Nicholas Biddle, 15 February 1777, in NDAR v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 1210.
witness for the prosecution claimed that the owner of the *Baltimore Hero* was Maryland’s agent on the island, Abraham van Bibber. While known to be true, de Graaff and others adamantly denied this charge. Van Bibber himself answered in the negative when asked, “Had he ever signed any blank commissions of the Congress of North America, or seen any such signed by anyone else on this island?”\(^1\) De Graaff clearly understood the economic importance of maintaining his connections with American agents on St. Eustatius and was willing to circumvent the law to protect this network. According to the deposition given by Foster McConnell, owner of the *May*, “the governor addressed himself to the deponent and sayed sir, you must take care how you accuse Mr. Vanbibbee for if you accuse him it may be of serious consequence to you.”\(^12\)

Van Bibber’s denial of involvement with the privateer and de Graaff’s threat to McConnell stemmed from mutual commercial interests. Van Bibber, in partnership with Richard Harrison on Martinique, had been delivering gunpowder to Maryland and Virginia as a state agent as early as March 1776.\(^13\) He found a willing ally in Johannes de Graaff, who assumed the role of governor in September of that year. Writing to the Maryland Council of Safety in early November, Van Bibber confirms “this is the best place by far and grows less difficult to transact here, as the Dutch have discover’d that their laws when put in force must ruin their merchants – I am on the best terms with his Excellency the governor and have his word and promise relative to some particulars that gives me great satisfaction and puts much in our powers…we are as well fixed with him.

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\(^12\) Deposition of Foster McConnell, January 1777, in *NDAR* v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 917-918.

now as we were with the former."\textsuperscript{14} The strong connection established between Governor de Graaff and Abraham van Bibber exemplifies the important nature of exchange on St. Eustatius and reveals the worth of the island to the American cause.

The friendly relationship between St. Eustatius and America predated the Revolution by nearly a century. As a free port, the island offered appealing commercial opportunities outside the mercantilist structures imposed by Britain and other imperial European governments. Loose enforcement of the Navigation Acts, policies designed to restrict trade outside the empire, allowed American smuggling to flourish. By the end of the seventeenth century, American port cities had established commercial contacts on islands throughout the Caribbean. St. Eustatius, in particular, became a popular port of call following Britain’s imposition of the Molasses Act in 1733. By placing heavy duties on foreign sugar, molasses, and rum, parliament hoped to force Americans to purchase the more expensive sugar products of the British islands. Adjusting to demand, St. Eustatius developed a market for cheap French molasses and sugar. To manage this lucrative trade, which expanded significantly during the Seven Years War (1756-1763), agents of several American merchant houses were appointed to the island, further solidifying the relationship between the American colonies and St. Eustatius.

In addition to French sugar, American merchants also sought Dutch tea. Parliament’s attempt to raise revenue in the colonies, which included a tax on British tea, made the product of the Dutch East India Company an appealing alternative. By 1770, St. Eustatius was the primary supplier of tea to the American colonies. Many New England merchants, including John Hancock, corresponded directly with merchants in the

\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Jameson, “St. Eustatius,” 690-691.
Dutch Republic. Hancock’s commercial network included Joan Hodshon, Thomas and Adrian Hope, and Jean de Neufville, all merchants of Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{15} An established relationship with St. Eustatius and a familiarity with its commercial practices would greatly benefit America in the coming conflict.

In 1775, the resources of the colonies were stretched thin as a boycott of British imports went into effect and European companies imposed new limitations on credit extended to Americans. Everyday goods became scarce and valuable. In a letter to her husband John, Abigail Adams requested that he purchase a box of pins in Philadelphia, even at the cost of ten dollars\textsuperscript{16}. Of greater concern to Congress than the lack of household supplies was the dangerous deficit of military stores. Gunpowder, in particular, was badly needed. As described by General Washington shortly after the Battle of Bunker Hill, “we are so exceedingly destitute that our artillery will be of little use, without a supply both large and seasonable. What we have must be reserved for the small arms, and that managed with the utmost frugality.”\textsuperscript{17} In an effort to maintain moral, Washington would fill his powder barrels with sawdust to conceal the shortage.\textsuperscript{18} Congress received several similar pleas for supplies over the course of the year, particularly from the besieged state of New York. In July 1775, its Committee of Safety implored, “We have no arms, we have no powder, we have no blankets. For God’s sake, send us money, send us arms, send us ammunition.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Victor Enthoven, “'That Abominable Nest of Pirates,'” \textit{Early American Studies} 10, no.2 (2012): 286.
\textsuperscript{16} Helen Augur, \textit{The Secret War of Independence} (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1955), 34.
\textsuperscript{17} Augur, \textit{Secret War of Independence}, 35.
\textsuperscript{19} Augur, \textit{Secret War of Independence}, 35.
Several American merchants had been procuring quantities of gunpowder from their Caribbean contacts as early as 1774. A majority of these stores, however, were not offered to Congress. Coastal provinces were inclined to hoard ammunition for their own defense while profiteers stockpiled barrels in anticipation of a better market. While undoubtedly aware of the commercial opportunities available, Congress initially declined to open trade with foreign powers in Europe or the West Indies. With reconciliation still a viable option, the body could not approve a measure which would further offend Britain. In the early stages of the war, therefore, the Continental Army and needy local militias relied on the meager stores of gunpowder garnered from raids on royal arsenals, the capture of British ships, and a short-lived program of home manufacture.

The rejection of the Olive Branch petition and Britain's subsequent Proclamation of Rebellion in August 1775 indicated that reconciliation would not so easily or quickly be achieved. As a result, the American mindset began to shift toward complete independence from the mother country. Congress, now fervently considering the position of its forces in relation to Europe's strongest military power, soon moved to establish its own contacts abroad. Not only were military supplies needed, but knowledge of potential allies and other means of foreign support. By the summer of 1776 Continental vessels were arriving at Caribbean ports to gage the sentiment of foreign officials on American independence. The warm welcomes received, most famously the salute to the Andrew Doria, encouraged the expansion of networks in these ports. America would come to rely on St. Eustatius, and the wider Caribbean, to relay goods and intelligence from Europe in support of the war effort.
The Secret Committee of Trade, formed in September of 1775, was initially charged with negotiating contracts for arms and ammunition, but within months it was empowered to direct all aspects of foreign trade. Members were prominent American merchants, among them the well-known Philadelphia businessman Robert Morris. His firm, Willing & Morris, was one of several contracted to supply materials requested by Congress, including gunpowder, weapons, and sailcloth as well as medicine and lead for bullets.

Within four months of his appointment to the Secret Committee, Morris was invited to join the Marine Committee, a group charged with raising a Continental Navy, and the Committee of Secret Correspondence, tasked with establishing diplomatic relations with foreign powers. Participation in these three organizations granted Morris substantial influence in the expansion and management of transnational networks. Such authority also made him a significant point of contact in the flow of goods and information. Operating in Philadelphia, Morris obtained a lucrative contract with the merchant company Penet and Pliarne of France. In directing these negotiations and overseeing several others, he established and maintained a network of contacts throughout the Caribbean. The extent of Morris’ Caribbean network is revealed in his instructions to Captain Nicholas Biddle, of the Continental frigate *Randolph*: “Should you take any prizes in the West Indies that are bona fide British property… you may send them into Martinico to the care of William Bingham Esqr – to St. Eustatia to the care of Saml Curzon junr Esqr – At Curacoa [Curaçao] to Mr. Governor – at the Cape Francois to Mr. Ceronio, at St. Nicholas Mole [Saint-Domingue] to Mr. John Dupuy.”

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20 Robert Morris to Nicholas Biddle, 15 February 1777, in *NDAR* v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 1210.
network encompassed both French and Dutch contacts in colonies spread throughout the Caribbean, Morris ensured multiple options for international exchange.

American operations in the Caribbean can be epitomized by Morris’ agent, Stephen Ceronio, who was posted at Cape François, Martinique to manage the transshipment of munitions from Europe through neutral island ports. In directing trade, Ceronio made several trips to the nearby islands of St. Eustatius, St. Thomas, and St. Croix. At each port, Ceronio assumed the identity of an agent for Willing & Morris, a cover story which enabled him to avoid suspicion in conducting business for the Secret Committee. Enhancing this deception, Ceronio’s negotiations often included private transactions on behalf of his contractor, Robert Morris. The mix of private trade and official business was not only lucrative, but practical. These transactions supported Ceronio’s residence on the island as remittances from the fledgling American government were sporadic and in any event did not cover his living expenses. Mixing cargos also provided additional cover for vessels en route to America and allowed Ceronio to dispatch greatly needed munitions quickly, rather than waiting to ship a full cargo. Interest and participation in markets for different commodities likely diversified contacts and widened networks. This practice of engaging in private and public commerce simultaneously was used by agents throughout the Caribbean.

The urgency of acquiring supplies sped the development of Morris’ network. Samuel Curzon, an agent at St. Eustatius, was also receiving consignments from the Secret Committee as early as 1776. Over the following year-and-a-half, several ships were directed to pick up cargos and dispatches from him as well as from the island’s
other congressional agents, Cornelius Stephenson and Henricus Gode.\textsuperscript{21} Robert Morris acknowledged that the Secret Committee owed Curzon a great debt, clear recognition of his successful business ventures in 1777.\textsuperscript{22} Curzon formed a partnership with Isaac Gouverneur, an American agent at the Dutch port of Curaçao, in the fall of 1778. Records indicate that their company had numerous contacts in the Dutch Republic, including Amsterdam merchants Nicolaas and Jacob van Staphorst, Alexander Honingman, Robout van Loon, Johannes Hoffma, and Jacob van Bunschoten, as well as Hassell and Tasker of Rotterdam.\textsuperscript{23} These connections linked the Dutch islands and extended back to the Netherlands, a valuable network for aiding American efforts to forge stronger connections with Europe.

Congress drew on the Caribbean network and its international links in February 1776 to request that blankets, clothing, and stockings be procured by the commissioners in Paris. As director of transnational exchange, Robert Morris assured the Secret Committee, “A copy [of the request] certified by myself goes by the Independence & you had best send me some more for other opportunities.”\textsuperscript{24} These “other opportunities” imply use of his extensive network to transmit information. The significance placed on successfully obtaining these supplies is apparent in an earlier letter to Nicolas Biddle. After instructing the captain to call on agents at Martinique, St. Eustatius, and other Caribbean ports to receive cargo and exchange dispatches, Robert Morris urges him to proceed with haste back to America: “The uncertainty of the fate of war makes us

\textsuperscript{21} Continental Marine Committee to James Robinson, 12 March 1777, in NDAR v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 1236.
\textsuperscript{23} Enthoven, “That Abominable Nest of Pirates,” 290.
\textsuperscript{24} Robert Morris to the Secret Committee of Correspondence, 19 February 1777, in NDAR v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 1236.
cautious of saying positively which shall be the best port... you are to be known to small cruizers by a white jack at the fore top mast head and a pendant over it. Shew this same signal to the light house and we will send down orders there to answer it by a white sheet if all is well.” Several cruisers would be on the lookout for the Randolph, ready to lend assistance. The care with which ships were brought back to American ports emphasizes the reliance of Congress on its island contacts and the value placed on transactions occurring in the Caribbean.

In the early years of the Revolutionary War, networks throughout the Caribbean ensured the steady supply of arms and ammunition to the United States and also served as important channels of communication. As the conflict continued, the formalization of the French Alliance in February of 1778 shifted clandestine trade and diplomatic communication directly to St. Eustatius. Since Martinique and other French ports were no longer neutral, they were considered vulnerable to British attack. These circumstances, coinciding with the return of Johannes de Graaff from questioning in Europe, produced an economic boom on St. Eustatius. According to records kept by a Dutch admiral directing convoys of merchant vessels, 3,182 ships sailed from St. Eustatius in 1778-1779, an average of seven or eight per day. One ship, seized by the British, carried 1,750 barrels of gunpowder and 750 stands of arms, along with bayonets and cartridge cases. This cargo was a small sample of the military supplies which made their way to American shores. In exchange, that same year, 12,000 hogsheads of tobacco and 1.5 million ounces of indigo were shipped from America to St. Eustatius.26

25 Robert Morris to Nicholas Biddle. 15 February 1777, in NDAR v.7, ed. Clark, et al., 1210.
26 All figures from Tuchman, The First Salute, 56.
British patrols outside the port increased along with activity on the island, a sure sign of the importance of the island's connections. While British threats may have deterred some merchants, John Adams judged "from the success of several enterprizes by way of St. Eustatia, it seems that trade between the two countries [Dutch Republic and United States] is likely to increase."\textsuperscript{27} The frequency of exchange between St. Eustatius and the United States boded well for the relay of information along with goods. Tensions were flaring between Britain and the Dutch Republic in Europe; as no doubt the Committee of Secret Correspondence anxiously awaited news which would inform their decision on how best to proceed with the prosecution of the war.

The European Connection

The transatlantic exchange of information was of immense importance to the success of the war effort. Without a constant flow of news from American sources, European courts would be reliant on what news Britain chose to spread. A primary destination for correspondence traveling through the islands was the Netherlands. As a center of diplomacy, The Hague was an ideal location to sound out envoys of different courts on the possibility of an eventual alliance with America. To make these overtures, the Committee of Secret Correspondence appointed Charles Dumas, a scholar and American enthusiast, as its agent in the Dutch Republic in 1775. It is likely that Dumas was an acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin, who had toured the Netherlands in 1766.  

Dumas’ written instructions emphasize the importance of his role and illuminate a portion of the network he would be incorporated into: “We desire also that you take the trouble of receiving from Arthur Lee, agent for the Congress in England, such letters as may be sent by him to your care, and of forwarding them to us with your dispatches…send your letters to him under cover, directed to Mr. Alderman Lee, merchant, on Tower Hill, London, and do not send by post, but by some trusty shipper…And when you send to us…we recommend sending by way of St. Eustatia, to the care of Messrs. Robert and Cornelius Stevens, merchants there, who will forward your despatches to me [Franklin].”

Recognizing France as a potential ally, Dumas’ diplomatic efforts began at its embassy. As the French already held an active interest in America, his advocacy on

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29 Benjamin Franklin to Charles Dumas, 19 December 1775, in *Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution* (DCAR) v.5, ed. Jared Sparks (Washington: John C. Rives, 1857), 190.
behalf of Congress likely reiterated information gathered from their own intelligence network. More valuable was the information Dumas forwarded to the United States. Reporting back to Franklin, he writes, “In the conversation I had with this [French] Minister, I observed that the wishes of his nation are for you... we have gained this advantage, that an opening is made which must dispose France in your favor, and engage her to tolerate and secretly to encourage even, any assistance your vessels can derive from France, Spain, and the Indies.”30

Positive reports from Dumas, corroborated by several other contacts in both the Caribbean and Europe, prompted Franklin to travel to Paris and engage in diplomatic efforts directly. In notifying Dumas of this development, the Secret Committee reaffirmed his importance as a point of contact in their network: “We request to hear from you frequently... Your letters, via, St. Eustatia, directed to the Committee of Secret Correspondence, then put under a cover to Mr. Robert Morris, merchant, Philadelphia, and that letter covered to Mr. Cornelius Stevenson, or Mr. Henricus Godet, merchants at St. Eustatia, or under cover to Mr. Isaac Gouverneur, merchant at Curraoia, will certainly come safe, and if you can send with them regular supplies of the English and other newspapers, you will add to the obligation.”31

With Franklin actively negotiating treaties of amity and commerce with France in 1777, Dumas focused his attention and resources on expanding local connections and raising support among the Dutch. The Republic was deeply divided on American independence. Opinions of the conflict were not ideologically based, rather were formed

30 Charles Dumas to Benjamin Franklin, 30 April 1776, in DCAR v.5, ed. Sparks, 191-192.
31 Committee of Secret Correspondence to Charles Dumas, 24 October 1776, in DCAR v.5, ed. Sparks, 217-218.
in response to a political debate flaring in the States General. Both the army and the navy required rearmament, which force should be given priority was an issue that split the nation. Inland provinces, which maintained connections with the England, argued for developing land forces that would equal those of France. Coastal provinces, on the other hand, relied on oceanic trade and favored strengthening the navy to protect commerce. Furthermore, as France was rumored to be on the verge of entering the war against Britain, shippers anticipated an increase in demand for neutral carriers. Well aware of this long standing debate, Dumas sought out connections with Amsterdam businessmen, the driving force behind the mercantile lobby.

Dutch merchants were interested in establishing direct commercial connections with an independent America, yet knew little about the United States. As Dumas conveyed to Congress: “they complain everywhere of knowing nothing of your affairs but what the English wish Europe should know.” Correspondence traveling through the American network kept Dumas well informed of recent military victories, news which he spread to great effect. Writing to the Committee, he quotes from a letter written by a new contact: “I received on the 11th the account of the victory of General Gates [at Saratoga]. It was pulled out of my hands. I pray you, as soon as you receive advice that Howe has done as well as Burgoyne [British General at Saratoga], to let me have the great pleasure of knowing it first, that I may regale many persons with the news. You cannot think what a bustle there is yet in all companies and cafes about this affair, and how they fall on the

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32 Charles Dumas to the Committee of Foreign Affairs. 14 June 1777, in DCAR v.5, ed. Sparks, 239.
English Ministers.\textsuperscript{33} As illustrated by this response, the demand for news about America enabled valuable information to reach a wide audience.

In 1779, increased British patrols in northern European waters and the Caribbean pushed the States General to consider the appropriate response to such interference with trade. This debate, which Dumas relayed to the United States, again split the nation according to interest. The mercantile lobby advocated for the implementation of "unlimited convoy", an armed escort for all merchant ships sailing from the Republic. While a convoy would benefit Dutch commerce, opponents claimed the British would interpret its use as the resistance to search. To question Britain's right to protect the waters of the Channel would be to question British sovereignty. Anxiety over increasing British aggression in the West Indies, particularly around St. Eustatius, prompted Admiral Bylandt to call attention to the vulnerability of the island. In addition to the necessity of protecting ships traveling to and from the West Indies, Fort Oranje required reinforcement.

While provincial councils favored unlimited convoy, the States General refused to confirm the vote. Despite this decision, a convoy of merchantmen set sail on December 31, 1779 under the command of Admiral Bylandt. Off the Isle of Wight, in the English Channel, the Admiral refused the signal of a British squadron to standby for search. After firing two warning shots at the sloop dispatched to conduct the inspection, Bylandt's convoy was attacked by the British squadron. So as not to incite war, Bylandt allowed his ships to be the taken into British custody. Enraged by this incident, the States General voted in favor of unlimited convoy in April 1780.

\textsuperscript{33} Dumas to the Committee of Foreign Affairs. December 16, 1777, DCAR, v.5, 242.
Thanks to an informative network, the increasing tension between the Dutch Republic and Britain was well known to American leaders. In order to gauge its effect on Dutch sentiment toward America, specific orders were relayed by Dumas to Captain John Paul Jones. After capturing a British vessel, Jones was to request shelter in the harbor of Amsterdam. Forced to act openly on the presence of an American warship and its prize, Dutch officials would publically indicate their intentions toward the United States. On October 3, 1780, John Paul Jones arrived in the roadstead following the famous engagement between his ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, and the British vessel *Serapis*. Jones was received as a hero and granted both shelter and care for the wounded. Nevertheless, he was publically denied access to stores of ammunition and was adamantly encouraged to sail as soon as possible. His claims to having been issued a French commission, conveniently lost during battle, enabled Dutch officials to save face in front of the British. While a decisive recognition of American sovereignty was not achieved, the commissioners' plan had served a purpose. As William V, the Prince of Oranje, wrote to a magistrate, “a secret treaty has been made between Amsterdam and the Americans,” and Jones’ motive is “to put the Republic under the necessity of taking various steps that could be considered as a kind of recognition of their independence.”

The secret treaty to which William V refers developed simultaneously with the Jones affair and demonstrates the reach of American networks. Shortly after the conclusion of the French-American alliance, Dumas had forwarded a copy of the corresponding commercial treaty to Pieter Van Berckel, Amsterdam’s chief magistrate. Van Berckel, in turn, established a connection with the American agent in Germany.

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34 Quoted in Nordholt, *Dutch Republic and American Independence*, 72.
William Lee. Dumas’ information and Van Berckel’s contact resulted in the “accidental”
meeting of Jean de Neufville, an Amsterdam merchant, with Lee to discuss and draft an
unofficial commercial treaty between the Dutch Republic and the United States. The
possibility of a sanctioned treaty circulated through the town councils of Amsterdam and
Holland, but a formal decision on the issue was not made. Nevertheless, rumors of a
secret Dutch-American treaty leaked and were soon reported in English newspapers.

The unofficial treaty drafted by de Neufville and Lee traveled through the
Caribbean network to Philadelphia where it was forwarded to Henry Laurens, who was
preparing to replace John Adams as an American envoy at The Hague. Laurens sailed
from Philadelphia in August 1780. His ship, the Mercury, was stopped by H.M.S. Vestal,
cruising off Newfoundland. Following protocol, Laurens threw his important papers
overboard in a bag weighted with shot. Unfortunately for Laurens, the bag had not been
sufficiently deflated and it bobbed on the surface where it caught the attention of a British
sailor. Among the incriminating papers recovered by the British was a copy of the
commercial treaty and related correspondence.

The existence of a commercial treaty, though unsanctioned, proved the spark that
precipitated Britain’s declaration of war against the Dutch Republic on December 20,
1780. Outlining British grievances against the Dutch in a speech to parliament, Lord
North cites the provisioning of France with warlike stores, the commercial treaty with
America, the acceptance of John Paul Jones, and the salute to a rebel ship at St. Eustatius.
Each of these listed causes for war can be directly linked to the activities of the American
network.
During his time as British ambassador to The Hague, Joseph Yorke became well aware of the success of the American network. More than a month prior to the official declaration of war he outlined the necessity of making an attack on St. Eustatius: "It is sufficient to cast an eye upon the Custom House lists of the Rebel Ports in North America to see what is carrying on through St. Eustatius, Curacao and other Dutch settlements, but above all the former...As these places, but St. Eustatius in particular, are the channels of correspondence and connection with North America..." to take it would "cut off the intercourse between Amsterdam and His Majesty’s enemies and rebellious subjects, till satisfaction is given for the past, and security for the future."\textsuperscript{35} Shortly after delivering the declaration of war, orders were given leading to the sack of St. Eustatius.

\textsuperscript{35} Quoted in Jameson, "St. Eustatius," 95.
The Sack of St. Eustatius

Admiral George Brydges Rodney, commander of the Barbados and Leeward Islands squadron, received the secret orders on January 27, 1781. His fleet, based at St. Lucia, represented the first line of defense for the British West Indies and North America. Admiral Rodney was a capable leader of what was considered to be the most important naval station in the Atlantic. In May 1779, he had engaged the French fleet in the Caribbean and averted its attempt to capture Barbados. The enemy squadron was so badly damaged that the French commander was also forced to abandon his secondary objective of proceeding to America.

The conquest of St. Eustatius nearly two years later would temporarily mar Rodney’s status as a celebrated admiral. His obsession with the island’s legendary fortune precluded effective management of the squadron. As the French fleet under Admiral de Grasse sailed unimpeded from Europe and through the Caribbean en route to Virginia, Rodney was busily engaged in auctioning off goods plundered from the island’s rich storehouses. “The lairs of St. Eustatius,” Admiral Samuel Hood later remarked, “were so bewitching as not to be withstood by flesh and blood.”36 Such carelessness contributed directly to the British defeat at Yorktown.

An impressive force comprised of fifteen British ships of the line, carrying three thousand troops under General John Vaughan, arrived off St. Eustatius on February 3, 1781. With a garrison of fewer than sixty men and a single Dutch warship in port, the island was incapable of defending itself against this superior force. For the honor of its

flag, two rounds were defiantly fired from Fort Oranje before Governor de Graaff
surrendered unconditionally to Admiral Rodney. To the inhabitants, unaware of the
Dutch Republic’s recent entry into war, the island’s instant capture “was as sudden as a
clap of thunder...as tremendous as it was rapid.”

Following the conquest of St. Eustatius, which included the capture of 150
merchant ships in the bay and a convoy of 30 vessels recently departed for Holland,
Rodney spent three months overseeing the plunder of the island and the auction of its
goods. The warehouses of Oranjestad’s lower town, which stretched for over a mile and
averaged a combined rent of £1.2 million per year, yielded approximately £3 million in
cash and trade goods. The admiral had found these storehouses overflowing with
merchandise, leaving even “the beach covered with tobacco and sugar.” Under orders
to confiscate all private property, British troops ransacked the residences of upper town
and stopped individuals on the street to search them “in the most shameful manner.” As
prisoners of war, residents were later grouped by nationality to be deported to
corresponding islands. So efficient was the extraction of wealth from the island and so
harsh the treatment of its inhabitants, that Rodney’s conduct would later be denounced in
Parliament as the equivalent of a “sentence of beggary pronounced indiscriminately
against all.”

37 Quoted in Harold A. Larrabee, Decision at the Chesapeake (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1964), 164.
38 Warehouse rent, in Larrabee, Decision at the Chesapeake, 162. Estimate of plunder, in Tuchman, First Salute, 97.
40 Quoted in O'Shaughnessy, Men Who Lost America, 297.
41 Quoted in O'Shaughnessy, Men Who Lost America, 297.
As the sack of St. Eustatius was swift and unexpected, business records and correspondence which might otherwise have been destroyed were also confiscated. Among the papers most carefully inspected by Rodney were those belonging to Samuel Curzon and Isaac Gouverneur, both American agents of Congress. Their recent implication in the proposed commercial treaty between America and the Dutch Republic made the merchants of particular interest to the British government. Spanning from May 1779 to January 1781, the letter books and records of Curzon and Gouverneur illuminate the nature of business conducted on St. Eustatius as well as the expansive commercial network which had been fostered by the island’s status as a free port.

Records pertaining to the shipment of arms and ammunition to America are necessarily circumspect. To accommodate the risk of interception, requests for military stores were generally only alluded to. In addition to a list of conventional goods, for example, one contact pointedly asked that Curzon and Gouverneur “do the needful.” As suppliers for Congress and agents of individual states, the partners drew on a far reaching network of commercial contacts. Their papers indicate connections with merchants across the Caribbean (particularly at Curacao and St. Croix), and in Europe (primarily Amsterdam). Interestingly, the earliest letter in the set, dated May 15, 1779, is from William Manning of London. The brief missive served to acknowledge a bill of exchange issued by Robert Downing Jennings (a British merchant at St. Eustatius) on the prestigious Amsterdam house of Thomas and Adrian Hope. While the particulars of this transaction are unknown, the entanglement of British citizens in a business which directly supported the enemy was not uncommon, particularly on St. Eustatius. The situation was

deplored by Admiral Rodney, who described these merchants as “traitors to their king and parricides to their country.”\textsuperscript{43} He would later justify his callous actions against the island’s entire population with a statement seemingly aimed at the Dutch: “a perfidious people, wearing the mask of friendship, traitors to their country, and rebelling against their king deserve no favor or consideration.”\textsuperscript{44}

In addition to documenting commercial activities, the papers of Curzon and Gouverneur are typical of the St. Eustatius merchant community in their attention to local events and the current state of international affairs. By the late 1770s, the Eastern Caribbean had become a focal point of the war. These years saw the capture of the islands of Dominica, St. Martin, and St. Bartholomew by the French and the seizure of St. Lucia by the British. While St. Eustatius had long been protected by its neutrality, Americans on the island undoubtedly observed with concern the increasing number British warships gathering at St. Kitts, only five miles away.

Letters to Curzon and Gouverneur reflect the effects of the strengthened British presence in the Caribbean – “accidents” including the delay of shipments and loss of cargoes are lamented on several occasions. Reports of a disruption in commerce often incorporate further remarks on the larger state of affairs. Latimer Holstead of Portsmouth, Virginia writes, “I hope ere long all those injured nations will adopt some salutary plan as to deter and at least prevent…such unwarrantable proceedings…whether we shall have it in our power long to enjoy trade with you is at present uncertain as it will depend altogether on the spirited remonstrance…their High Mightinesses shall make to

\textsuperscript{43} Quoted in O’Shaughnessy, \textit{Men Who Lost America}, 299.
\textsuperscript{44} Quoted in O’Shaughnessy, \textit{Men Who Lost America}, 299.
the freedoms taken by the British men of war and cruisers."4\textsuperscript{5} This reference to the League of Armed Neutrality echoes the interests of several merchants. The formation of such a coalition against Britain would decrease the present risks involved with shipping.

The multinational character of its inhabitants made St. Eustatius an entrepôt for the world’s news as well as for its goods. Both family links and commercial connections ensured news from Europe reached the island. The heavy traffic of ships, usually seven to ten arrivals per day and regular convoys of thirty or more, promoted the circulation of this information around the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{4\textsuperscript{6}} Curzon and Gouverneur were thus occupationally and geographically situated to serve as a valuable link on this information network.

A letter to the partners from the Van Staphorst brothers of Amsterdam mentions the enclosure of a missive from “his Excellency John Adams Esq. to your good selves, which please to make use of and to forward...by the first safe conveyance.” The letter continues, “You’ll no doubt be acquainted before this reaches you that Mr. Laurens, old President of Congress, on his voyage to Europe has been taken by the English and is kept a close Prisoner in the Tower of London...of which Mr. A[dam]s will give you some particulars...we are extremely sorry for this unhappy event, since we have a notion that his being in this Country would have been of great Success to the American cause. The news you gave us of the most extraordinary Conduct of the English at St. Martin was known already here, before we got your letter. It should certainly be very surprising if experience had not proved us sufficiently that these desperados are capable of doing anything whatsoever that they think convenient...”\textsuperscript{4\textsuperscript{7}} The strength of the partners’

\textsuperscript{4\textsuperscript{5}} Quoted in Hurst, \textit{Golden Rock}, 69.
\textsuperscript{4\textsuperscript{6}} O’Shaughnessy, \textit{Men Who Lost America}, 291.
\textsuperscript{4\textsuperscript{7}} Quoted in Hurst, \textit{Golden Rock}, 76-77.
position at St. Eustatius is evident in both their implied contribution to the commercial
treaty carried by Henry Laurens and their role in the transfer of news and intelligence.

That a majority of the letters seized from Curzon and Gouverneur were sent from
America or Amsterdam would have been, in Rodney’s view, evidence enough to confirm
their guilt by association. References found within to transactions on behalf of “your
government” and to key members of Congress only augmented the perceived depths of
their treachery. Curzon and Gouverneur were immediately placed under arrest to await
transport to London to stand trial. As the figurehead of the island’s lucrative trade with
America, Governor de Graaff was also sent to England. He was charged by Rodney with
being “the first man who insulted the British flag by taking up the salute of a pirate and a
rebel, and who, during his whole administration has been remarkably inimical to Great
Britain and a favorer of the American rebellion.” The names of two of the captured ships,
de Graaff and Lady de Graaff, further “prove how much the Americans thought
themselves obliged to him.”

Admiral Rodney’s decision to return to England with the West India convoy in
late August 1781 was motivated in part by a desire to defend himself against the public
censure of his actions at St. Eustatius. To this end, the Caribbean squadron was
dispersed, leaving only fourteen ships (a third of the original fleet) under Admiral Hood
to rendezvous with the five ships of Admiral Graves in North America. On September 5,
1781, these nineteen British ships of the line, with a total of fifteen hundred guns, met de
Grasse’s force of twenty-four warships and two thousand guns in the Chesapeake Bay.

The French victory at the Virginia Capes forced the surrender of General Cornwallis at

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48 Quoted in Tuchman, *First Salute*, 97.
Yorktown. Blame for the subsequent loss of the North American colonies initially fell on Admiral Rodney. As the commander of what was considered to be the most important naval station in the Atlantic, his duty was to head the fleet at sea in anticipation of the arrival of a hostile fleet. That Rodney prolonged his stay on St. Eustatius in order to auction off goods indiscriminately plundered from the island's residents indicated to many officials a gross neglect of responsibility. His delayed and inaccurate intelligence reports to General Sir Henry Clinton and Admiral Thomas Graves in New York were also raised in the inquiry. Speaking in Parliament, Lord Shelburne opined that he "solemnly believed that the capture of Lord Cornwallis was owing to the capture of St. Eustatius."50

In addition to government officials, the displaced merchants of St. Eustatius and their associates loudly criticized Rodney's behavior. The newly formed Society of West India Planters and Merchants in London submitted a formal address to the king (which was also printed and distributed to the public) and organized a delegation to meet directly with Lord Germain, Secretary of State for America. French businessmen were in a similar state of uproar, going so far as to suggest that their own government settle accounts through a similar extraction of wealth from the occupied British islands of Grenada, Dominica, and St. Vincent. Retaliation was of the utmost concern to Britain as Rodney had clearly acted in disregard of both moral norms and well-established customs of warfare. In declaring the residents of St. Eustatius pirates, the admiral could justify his conduct by a loophole which denied outlaws legal status. Despite past acceptance of legal ambiguity in the Caribbean, European officials now favored adherence to

50 Quoted in O'Shaughnessy, Men Who Lost America, 292.
international customs in the region. When the British and the French occupied each
other’s islands, compliance with the terms of honorable surrender was expected.

Regardless of the public outcry and the pointed accusations leveled against him,
Rodney survived the official inquiry into his management of St. Eustatius. As suggested
by Horace Walpole, the admiral’s staunch support of the North administration led many
in Parliament to vote against their consciences in his favor. Rodney would ultimately
redeem his reputation and win immunity from further censure with an astonishing victory
against de Grasse’s French fleet in the Battle of the Saintes, occurring in April 1782 off
of Dominica. Although he quickly rose to celebrity, the repercussions of the sack of St.
Eustatius loomed in the background for years to come.

The brutal pillage of St. Eustatius resulted in over one hundred suits being filed
against the admiral in England’s law courts. Ninety of these claims sought amounts of
over £300,000 and collectively totaled the approximate equivalent of Rodney and
Vaughan’s combined commission. Although several of these cases lasted for years, a
majority of British merchants were eventually fairly reimbursed (France would receive
two million livres from the government). In light of his losses, Rodney blamed the
merchants’ victory on the disappearance of the written evidence he had collected at St.
Eustatius. These record books and letters had been sent to Lord Germain, from whose
office a great number mysteriously vanished. The admiral’s friends blamed his political
enemies. An alternate account suggests their removal was per the request of London’s
wealthy merchants. The vast amount of wealth Rodney was able to extract from St.
Eustatius confirms that the island was the center of an intricate network. Evidence of the
extensive amount of information flowing to and from this island is supplied by British citizen Richard Downing Jennings.

Jennings, former resident of St. Eustatius and business contact of American agents Curzon and Gouverneur, filed a claim for £70,000 against Rodney. The delay in settling his account prompted him to write a pamphlet outlining the sack of the island and his present situation. *The Case of an English Subject* was originally published in 1784 and includes references to the nature of business transactions as well as the potential the island had held for the British as an information hub.

Born in Bermuda, Jennings moved to St. Eustatius “for the purpose of trade only, with the laudable intention of bettering my fortune, but not of abandoning my country.” Describing the commercial opportunities available at St. Eustatius, he emphasizes the importance of the island’s community to the Empire. As a merchant, Jennings expanded the market for British manufactures, provisioned the sugar colonies, and in one instance supplied arms and ammunition to the governor of St. Kitts. “It is to be regretted,” he states “that it [St. Eustatius] had no credit for the advantages it afforded this kingdom and its colonies, and that some of the British commanders on that station neglected the offers, as well of supplies as of intelligence, made from thence.”

In June 1780, Jennings had voluntarily gathered information on behalf of an official at St. Kitts who had received several anonymous intelligence tips. The same offer was made to Admiral Rodney soon after his arrival in the Caribbean. In an unsigned letter dated March 31, 1780, Jennings stressed that it would be unremarkable

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52 Jennings, *Case of an English Subject*, 9.
for a merchant to make frequent trips to Martinique, “the grand rendezvous of the enemy.” St. Eustatius itself also held great potential in this regard as “there are many of these vessels that bring intelligence of an interesting nature. Certain accounts sometimes come from the French islands of their force, expected supplies, etc...from America, intelligence of consequence is often brought. Lastly, vessels may frequently arrive from Europe, bringing some important news...vessels from Holland are coming in almost daily: and from these circumstances, there is hardly a French or English reinforcement coming out that previous notice is not received at St. Eustatius before it arrives.”

In *The Case of an English Subject*, Jennings depicts the admiral’s arrival at St. Eustatius in February 1781 as unexpected and his subsequent actions as equally astonishing. Despite acting on Rodney’s requests for supplies, Jennings found his property confiscated and his family “formally banished in a manner so unworthy of the British character.” Observing the auction of looted goods, which included military stores, he was outraged by the decision to grant special permits to interested parties from enemy ports (those from Martinique, in particular). Greed had overcome the desire for imperial security: “the French commanders by these means were regularly informed of what was passing; they knew perhaps better than Lord Hood when that admiral was to expect the reinforcement of these [Rodney’s] ships and captains.” Based on the details supplied by Jennings, the intelligence network centered on St. Eustatius was universally available and extremely valuable. The diverse national backgrounds and motivations of

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53 Quoted in Hurst, *Golden Rock*, 62.
54 Hurst, *Golden Rock*, 63.
55 Jennings, *Case of an English Subject*, 15-16.
56 Jennings, *Case of an English Subject*, 22-23.
the island’s population were essential to supporting this lucrative exchange of information.

In addition to Jennings’ misfortune, the attack on St. Eustatius ruined the livelihood of several other Bermuda-born merchants. These traders formed a significant portion of the white, non-Dutch community on the island and, like their Dutch counterparts, had dealt with American, French, Spanish, and British contacts alike. With a reputation as the safest carriers, fast sailing Bermuda sloops were continuously employed by merchants to deliver valuable cargos to American ports – among the few that were caught was a vessel carrying 400 barrels of gunpowder and 150 muskets. With a reputation as the safest carriers, fast sailing Bermuda sloops were continuously employed by merchants to deliver valuable cargos to American ports – among the few that were caught was a vessel carrying 400 barrels of gunpowder and 150 muskets.57 Additionally, an estimated 1,000 of these swift vessels were built on Bermuda and refitted at St. Eustatius to be sold to Americans as privateers.58

Since Bermuda relied on the American mainland for food supplies, America’s boycott of British imports threatened to place considerable strain on the island. The potential severity of lost trade compelled many Bermudians to sympathize with the Revolutionary cause. Henry Tucker Sr., head of a prosperous merchant family, successfully petitioned Congress in July of 1775 to continue trade with the island. Receiving news of a well-stocked, unguarded arsenal in St. George, Congress resolved to trade food for military stores with any ship reaching its coast. As a token of friendship, a special concession also promised basic stores including candles, soap, and lumber to the island.

Since this initial exchange attracted closer British surveillance, Bermuda came to depend on its merchants at St. Eustatius for continued access to American provisions and other essential supplies. Nearly one quarter of its fleet was engaged in this trade which helped sustain the island and its salt raking camps in the Turks. Jennings, among others, also coordinated the shipment of American goods to similarly distressed British colonies and warships in the Leeward Islands. The business was lucrative and, as Jennings emphasizes in his pamphlet, legally permissible after 1777. Parliament’s concession to allow limited participation in contraband trade blurred the definition of loyalty to the Empire, an allowance which Rodney was unwilling to acknowledge.

The admiral’s failure to realize the potential of the intricate intelligence networks illuminated by Jennings likely resulted from personal opposition to what the island represented. That London, too, opposed most involvement with an island notorious for contraband trade suggests Britain itself did not realize the strategic advantages of such connections. In striking contrast, Congress understood that merchants on St. Eustatius were essential links to networks which could supply America with both military stores and intelligence. By appointing agents, Congress ensured crucial information was consistently conveyed across the Atlantic. In providing news on the changing situation in Europe and facilitating communication with diplomats abroad, these networks were essential to securing the foreign support necessary for an American victory.
Conclusion

St. Eustatius never fully recovered from the blow dealt by Admiral Rodney. After nine months of British occupation, a French force captured the island and, in 1784, returned it to Dutch rule. The decline of St. Eustatius as an active entrepôt and the conclusion of the Revolutionary War saw the island’s connections with the United States fade away. Samuel Curzon died in a British prison, while Isaac Gouverneur and several other American merchants made their way back to the United States in search of other opportunities. While Americans have moved on, the legacy of St. Eustatius as the “golden rock” of the Caribbean and as an early supporter of independence is well remembered by islanders. November 16, the anniversary of the salute to the Andrew Doria, is celebrated as a national holiday.

The fort’s acknowledgement of the American flag in 1776 was a nod to merchants of all nations as much as it was a recognition of agents of the United States. St. Eustatius was sustained by multinational participation in trade and it profited from the spread of transatlantic networks. Expanding these networks, American merchants procured essential supplies for the United States. While tensions with Britain were of the utmost concern to the Dutch Republic, closer commercial relations with the United States proved to be a driving force in fostering interest in the American cause. Profitable exchange through St. Eustatius no doubt strengthened this sentiment.

American diplomatic interests were also well served by transatlantic networks which relayed vital news and information to and from Europe. Correspondence enabled Congress to disseminate favorable information and to use the intelligence it received to pursue foreign recognition of American sovereignty. The extensive use of these
networks calls attention to the crucial role the Caribbean islands, most especially St. Eustatius, played in supporting military and diplomatic efforts during the war. As an intermediary between America and Europe, St. Eustatius proved to be a vital source of information and supplies.
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ABSTRACT

As a free port situated in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean, the Dutch colony of St. Eustatius prospered as an entrepôt in the late eighteenth century. At its height, this tiny island of eight square miles welcomed an average of eight ships per day into its roadstead. The lucrative exchange of both goods and information on the island proved essential to America's prosecution of the Revolutionary War. Drawing on expansive commercial networks which linked the United States to Europe via the Caribbean, Congress secured greatly needed military stores for the Continental forces. As evidenced in part by the sizable network of Philadelphia businessman Robert Morris, these commercial contacts supplied the arms and ammunition necessary to prevent the early defeat of Washington’s army. The channels opened by St. Eustatius also facilitated diplomatic communication between America and potential European supporters as indicated by the efforts of Charles Dumas, Congress’ advocate at The Hague. His reports allowed the United States to monitor the volatile relationship between Britain and the Dutch Republic while providing Congress a means to promote the American cause in Europe.

Commercial disputes between Britain and the Dutch Republic culminated with the sack of St. Eustatius by Admiral George Rodney in 1781. Papers seized from resident merchants illustrate the nature and extent of the island’s trade network. The perspective of a British businessman, Richard Downing Jennings, provides further evidence of advantageous connections by showing St. Eustatius was a nucleus of an international information exchange. As an intermediary between the United States and Europe, St. Eustatius and the greater Caribbean proved to be essential to American independence. The goods and intelligence procured through its networks enabled the United States to prolong and expand the war against Britain.