On the Waterfront:

Wharfside Spaces and Economic Culture in Britain and America during the Eighteenth Century

Emma Hart, University of St Andrews

In the past decade, early modern historians have drawn more often than before on space as an analytical tool. Identifying domestic, public, and sacred spaces as arenas of interaction, scholars have explored how natural and built environments are instrumental in our understanding of some of the major cultural and political developments of the era. Some have even identified this work as constituting a “spatial turn.” While a number of aspects of economic history, such as the growth of empires and the creation of consumer societies, have benefited from spatial inquiries, economic historians have been relatively slow to embrace the broader possibilities of space as an analytical category. Theoretically-driven discussion of the capitalist landscape by social scientists has done little to persuade scholars who have traditionally favoured quantitative analysis that spaces and places are important beyond their role as novel sites of middling and elite consumption.[[1]](#footnote-1) I want to argue for the importance of investigating the spatial aspects of the economy, especially when it comes to our understanding of early modern economic culture. Specifically, I am interested in how practice and space influenced the structures of the local economy. Of course, such influences are hard to quantify, and this may be what has led many economic historians to overlook them. However, in order to fully grasp the British Atlantic’s complex economic culture, and the ways in which its elaboration affected economic culture, I believe we need to grasp the nettle and look more closely at these “unquantifiables.”

In this paper, I will explore this issue in the context of practice theories that seek to explain how cultures can be a product of the interaction between individuals and societies over both space and time, drawing especially on Anthony Giddens’ idea of “duality of structure.” Giddens’ model proposes that it is the daily occurring interaction between individuals, institutions, and the “settings” in which they take place, that shape cultures.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here, I look at the relationship between these three variables on the wharfside, concentrating especially on the interplay between private property, public space and institutions, and the economic activities that occurred on the waterfront of the British Atlantic port town.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In metropolitan Britain, wharves were considered to be “public” spaces. As such they were often under the control of public institutions – such as city corporations, merchant guilds, parliament and the nationwide Trinity House Pilots. This “public” ownership manifested itself in a number of ways. First of all, government leadership was evident when it came to “improving” wharves in the eighteenth century. With its increasing engagement in Atlantic trade, and with the growth of the city, Glasgow’s wharf facilities underwent major improvements. First of all Port Glasgow and the city’s Broomielaw quays were rebuilt. The Glasgow magistrates purchased Port Glasgow in 1663. In the following century they commissioned continual improvements in a (failed) effort to make it competitive with the larger facilities that developed at Greenock. As corporate property, these works were accomplished by the city council contracting with workmen and paying them out of the public purse. For example, in 1773 James Johnston was commissioned to “in a proper regular and sufficient manner, fill up with Mud and Stones and other materials the Mid Quay now Building by the City of Glasgow in the Harbour of Port Glasgow….” The Broomielaw – the quay which served smaller boats bringing goods for Glasgow’s domestic consumption requirements – was first improved in 1668, again using moneys from the public purse.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Following initial construction, the Glasgow authorities then continued to sink money into improving both the quays and access to them. Efforts were made to enhance the navigability of the Clyde with James Watt, among others, paid to widen and deepen the river in its higher reaches so as to admit larger ships. When Port Glasgow began losing out to the deeper and more accessible Port of Greenock in the 1750s, the city council obtained an act of parliament to charge a tonnage on vessels using the harbour to sponsor further improvements. The Act permitted the town magistrates to “Leay a Tonnage on all vessells going in and out of the Harbour of Port Glasgow on a Foreign Voyage of one penny half penny per ton, and on small vessells in the Coasting Trade three farthings per tun – the duties and tonnage arising therefrom to be applied towards deepening, Cleaning, and Maintaining said Harbour and for no other purpose whatever.” The city council was further authorized to borrow up to £5000 if such duties proved insufficient – which they soon did, resulting in a debate over whether the magistrates could manage the port “with greater frugality.” Overall, the improvement and management of Clydeside’s wharves was considered to be a public duty, with the burdens and benefits falling to the Glasgow Corporation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Because local government owned and invested in wharves in Britain, they also expected that they should be able to organize and regulate the commercial activity that took place on them. Thus, the wharves of Newcastle and Glasgow, while bustling, were closely monitored to ensure that they remained a location for unloading and loading but not for buying and selling.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 1771, Newcastle’s Common Council complained that “divers Persons do still continue the illegal and prejudicial Practice of Setting up Shambles and exposing Beef to sale thereon at the Keyside in this town, notwithstanding several of them have been indicted and convicted of, and fined for the same: It is orderd that the aforesaid Practice be wholly discontinued.” Likewise, in 1778 when some Newcastle timber merchants started storing timber on the wharf, “divers persons” soon complained to the council that they were “making the quay a repository for private purposes instead of a public landing wharf.” The council agreed with the petitioners, applying a time limit for the storage of cargoes.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Enforcing the principal that wharves were a place for receiving and shipping goods, but not for selling them, were a host of local officials operating according to regulations promulgated by the city corporation. These officials also oversaw the payment of the tolls and fees to the authorities by the wharf’s users. In Newcastle water bailiffs inspected the state of quayside equipment and machinery to check that it was fit for purpose and exacted fees from ship’s captains for wharf usage. Sometimes they overstepped their authority, and local merchants complained to the common council that “Pilots impose greatly on Strangers & exact Money from ‘em.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Even Glasgow’s Broomielaw, which saw very little long distance traffic, was carefully governed by a shoremaster from the late 1780s onwards. This individual, appointed by the city council and paid a regular salary, was charged with assigning berths to arriving ships, overseeing their loading and unloading, making sure that cargoes lay on the wharf for no more than twenty-four hours, and keeping the wharf clean.[[9]](#footnote-9)

As a result of these developmental and organizational strategies, Glasgow and Newcastle’s wharves were commercial spaces that operated according to a very particular rubric. Activity on them was conducted within the established lines of authority and customary power structures that had long existed to order the local economy. There were of course tensions between users and authorities. Greenock saw a major strike by dock workers for pay, merchants flouted the rules, and no doubt hucksters hovered on the quayside to try and sell to sailors. Commercialization meant wharves were increasingly busy. However, the experiences of Ralph Jackson, an apprentice to one of Newcastle’s leading hostmen in the 1750s, seems to confirm the idea that British wharves mostly places for loading and unloading goods, under the watchful eye of the designated corporate authority. As ensign to his master, who was a member of one of the most powerful Newcastle guilds, Jackson spent part of almost everyday on the “key” supervising the keelmen who loaded up coal brought to the waterfront. Jackson’s exhaustive diaries, with daily entries over almost his entire apprenticeship, record his presence there. They also include observations of what happened on the quay – boats were launched, once a pot of ale was drunk, prisoners were loaded onto a ship, a copper brewing vat got stuck fast while being unloaded from a boat, fights broke out, and gossip spread about a recent murder in the town. The only thing Jackson ever bought on the key was a pennyworth of oysters – which he did twice in six years.[[10]](#footnote-10)

These encroachments of commercialization onto the British wharf are put in the shade by the developments that took place on the early British American wharf. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Charleston and Philadelphia’s wharves were not only privately-owned spaces, but were also central locations in the trafficking of provisions – a market place in their own right, albeit one lacking in oversight by any official other than the (sparse) customs men and the occasional packer or measurer. In Charleston, the wharves were the prime location for the sale of many commodities, not least fresh-caught fish. In an advertisement in the *South Carolina Gazette*, one fisherman and wharf owner notified the public that they would know that fish was available when there “is a WHITE-FLAG hosted at the upper-end of Capt. *Roper's* wharf, near the *Curtain-Line.”[[11]](#footnote-11)* Even after the construction of the town’s fishmarket in 1770, its wharves continued to be central places of trade as boats came ashore bringing livestock, wood, and corn. The arrival of such commodities at the wharves nearest the market, according to one commentator, often resulted in them being sold off to individual buyers before they even reached the main marketplace. Another lamented “Does a boat come to town with corn, hogs, sheep, calves or other provisions, for the *Charles-town* market, there are people who watch the wharves before day, to engross the whole…This sort of fraud, is practiced both by white and black people.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Wharves were equally important as private commercial spaces in Philadelphia, where both wood and fish brought in from the surrounding countryside were sold to buyers on the spot. Aaron Leaming, a Cape May farmer, marketed the red cedar posts that he had harvested from his land by first gathering them into bundles on the beach near his home then loading these bundles onto a boat for Philadelphia. On arrival, the posts were unloaded at “Anthony Wilkinson’s wharf,” where buyers came to view and purchase them. Perhaps Leaming was following the example of fellow sellers, who sold wood at the Northern Liberty wharves, just outside the city limits, allowing them to sell short measures, much to the ire of the officers of the nearby Callowhill market.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It was because these wharves were owned by private citizens – usually merchants – that such commercial activity was permitted to take place on them. These men were looking to maximize profits on their prime waterside lots, and as a result erected buildings and set aside spaces in which as much commerce as possible could take place. When fire took hold on a wharf – as it quite often did if pitch and tar were being used to repair or build boats – the extent of the losses reported ably illustrate the liveliness of the early American wharfside economy. When William Fishbourne’s wharf caught fire in Philadelphia in 1730, the inferno “before it could be master'd consumed all the Stores, &c. on the Wharff” causing between four and five thousand pounds worth of damage. Charleston’s major fire of 1740 likewise tore though vast quantities of commodities that were being stored in the merchant warehouses along the East Bay.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The multiple advertisements placed in colonial newspapers by wharfingers underline the wharf’s commercial function. Joseph Brown explained to his Charleston clientele that he had “Just imported, and to be sold *very reasonable*, in a small Store next to Mr. *Beakman's* Shop on *Elliott's Wharfs*, choice and clay'd Sugar, *Carancas* Cocoa, Bay Salt, Verdigris, Limes, &c*”[[15]](#footnote-15)* Likewise, these maps (see Powerpoint), made for fire insurance and valuation purposes towards the end of the eighteenth century, elegantly reveal the commercial dimensions of the Charleston wharf. Particularly notable is the way in which each wharf is designated by the name of its private owner – the number of stores and businesses that are constructed on it – and in this example the way in which the wharf seems to represent an entire private compound (slides 1 and 2).

The ability of traders to buy up waterside lots and develop them into personal commercial empires, fronting directly on the Atlantic, meant that when local government wished to access or use waterside property for public purposes, they faced an uphill struggle. While in Britain public and corporate interests regularly took precedence over private ones at the waterfront, in early America the individual property owner and trader was the arbiter of access to the sea. Thus, when Charleston’s authorities decided to build their fish market, in an effort to order the trade and remove it from the control of individual slave owners (who were also often wharf owners), they had to set about buying back a lot from the men who owned the land (see slide 3).[[16]](#footnote-16) The Philadelphia authorities also faced a similar situation. In 1782, noting how “the rapid improvement of the water lots in the district of Southwark, of the late years, hath rendered them of great value, and unless timely care is taken to procure convenient places for public landings for the unlading of wood, hay, boards, timber, sand and stone, and other bulky and heavy articles, brought into the same by water for the use of the inhabitants, the public may in time be deprived of the benefit of access to the water for such purposes, to their injury, by increasing their land carriage,” the citizens of this Philadelphia suburb procured an Act and the assistance of the state government in a buy-back scheme that sought to preserve at least some public waterside space.[[17]](#footnote-17)

With the “public interest” the interloper on the waterfront, legislation designed to organize and regulate the activities of the majority private interest often showed restraint and respect (and even deference?) towards property owners that was noticeably absent in Britain. The question of damage to the wharf by the ships using it preoccupied the Charleston legislators in 1750. A wharfinger was required to “attend at all times at his *wharfs*, to give directions about mooring any vessel coming to the same, on pain of forfeiting *ten pounds* for every offence.” At the same time, though, pilots were held responsible for bringing vessels in correctly, so as to avoid damage. Furthermore, wharfingers’ role as masters of their own commercial waterfront domain was bolstered by the same law, which allowed them to have their own set of weights and measures – periodically checked by the authorities – for the measurement of goods marketed on their property. The function of the city as a “rubber stamp” for the activities of wharf owners was continued on after Charleston was incorporated in 1783, when a revised ordinance stipulated that wharf owners were permitted to develop their property with commercial buildings as they wished, but that they must conform to certain building standards (mostly to ensure fire resistance) ascertained by the council.

What to make of these contrasts in ownership and use of wharves on these opposing sides of the Atlantic? When historians have examined the British Atlantic economy, they have tended to emphasize the shared aspects of a merchant culture – especially as a merchant capitalist narrative has replaced an American “transition to capitalism” located on farms as the defining story of the early American economy.[[18]](#footnote-18) Surely, these groups were participants in a larger British Atlantic merchant culture. However, looking at the actual spaces they inhabited reveals important differences that we only detect when we read space, its use, and its ownership, as generative of economic culture. That is to say, rather than viewing the merchant’s counting house, wharf, and warehouse, as motifs of merchant culture, we see them instead as places that were instrumental in shaping it. Like sociologist Giddens – and recent social historian Andy Wood – we must see landscapes as “a discursive field” in which individuals and institutions influenced culture and custom.[[19]](#footnote-19) Taking this approach means that the wharfside spaces that I have described here – and the modes by which they were developed, owned, used, and policed – shaped merchants’ economic culture as much as the Navigation Acts, or the world of letters that united them as transatlantic “correspondents.” Indeed, because plenty of other people used wharves too, it also shaped their economic outlook – and meant that they shared interests with merchants even if perhaps they looked inwards on the domestic economy rather than just outwards towards the Atlantic.

In particular, such a comparison is informative because it gives us an insight into the relationship between individuals and private property in the market place in an age when ideas of laissez-faire individualism were in protracted conflict with beliefs about the common good, and corporate and national interests. Even while it expanded in response to the demands of the Atlantic trade, the British merchant wharf remained a place that was governed by corporate interests. The city corporation, the national government, and the merchant guild maintained their right to organize, profit from, and direct the activities that took place on the wharf. As such, individuals seeking to operate for their own benefit and profit – such as Newcastle’s butchers who wished sell meat to ship-owners or merchants who wanted to store wood free of charge – were viewed dimly. The presence of these individuals certainly suggests that, as the wharf commercialized, the corporate values that governed it were tested. However, the idea that the wharf was a corporate space subject to the proper authorities still stood at the centre of the mentality of those who operated on it. This idea undergirded ideas about the economic function of the wharf.

Early British Americans, however, viewed the situation differently. Lacking the complex institutions and property ownership patterns of the Old World, merchants and traders who valued wharf-space were able to buy their own “water lot.” They then developed it to serve their individual economic interests. This development involved building stores and business premises that might be leased out to other traders and artisans in the maritime trades. Stores also became places in which goods were not only “stored” but also sold retail and wholesale. Charleston’s slave traders even turned their wharves into auction blocks for enslaved Africans. However, this privatization of the wharf did not constitute a complete rejection of the “common interest.” This was, after all, an idea which was very deeply lodged in the economic psyche of early modern merchants – and was still current in the Old World. Instead, Americans refashioned the notion of the common, corporate interest to place it in service of private property. Philadelphia and Charleston’s wharfingers did have a duty to obey basic regulations that ensured the safety of the town and the fair conduct of business. Yet, the town itself also worked in service of the wharfingers and the integrity of their waterside commercial complexes. As a result, the regulations that were enacted by early American authorities mostly operated to protect private property, with the types of measures that were regularly enforced in Britain – such as forbidding buying and selling of goods on the wharf – cast aside. Even when the Pennsylvania government enacted its 1782 scheme to buy back water lots in the District of Southwark, the land was purchased by mortgage, payable with interest to private individuals. Only after the mortgage had been paid off could all of the income from the lots be devoted to their upkeep and improvement.

Wharves were a universal feature of Atlantic Port Cities in the New and Old Worlds, but they were not universal in their use or character. The differences stemmed from the ownership of waterfront property and the nature of the commercial activities that were consequently permitted to take place on it. This fostered contrasting economic cultures among the traders who frequented them. While British merchants were still operating within a domestic economy that valued and supported corporate economies and the common good, their American brethren were masters of their own waterfront empires. While American governing authorities played a role in the running of these spaces, the fortunes of the merchants that owned them were the ultimate beneficiaries. When trade was bad, it was the individual merchant who suffered. When it was good, it was he who profited. Surely, these fundamental differences at ground level, affecting trade on a day-to-day basis, must be taken into account as we move towards a more nuanced history of the early American economy; one that acknowledges the importance of the Atlantic world paradigm, but equally takes account of the very real particularities of an American process of economic development. Significantly, these were particularities that meant that, in early America, the idea of the “common good” legitimately incorporated the protection of private interest, in an economic culture that prized individual entrepreneurship and believed that protecting entrepreneurs was important for everyone.

1. For examples of a spatial turn in early modern history see Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People:* *Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013); ed Paul Stock, *The Uses of Space in Early Modern History* (Palgrave, 2015). The most famous of Marxist geographers is probably David Harvey, whose extensive publications on the topic include, for example, S*paces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This paper concentrates on four case studies – Philadelphia, Charleston, Glasgow, and Newcastle. Without using case studies this project, which is more broadly on market spaces in the British Atlantic world, would be unmanageable. Please ask if you would like to know more about why I picked these locations. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James Deas, *The River Clyde: A Historical Description of the Rise and progress of the Harbour of Glasgow and of the Improvement of the River from Glasgow to Port Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1876); Mitchell Library, B10/15/7587 -7598 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mitchell Library, C2/1/1: Committee reports of certain issues, p67 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ken Morgan and William Ashworth, who discuss the wharves of Bristol and London in their work on trade and customs in the eighteenth century, both describe wharves as spaces that were controlled by a number of urban authorities who ensured that informal dealing in provisions wouldn’t take place there. See Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade* and Ashworth, *Customs and Excise* (CUP, 2003). My thanks to Sheryllynne Haggerty for these references. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Regulations for the Broomielaw, Glasgow, ML and the Newcastle City Council minutes p137 16th December 1771, p304 16th December 1778, MD/NC/2/6: Oct 1766 to Sept 1785. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. MD/NC/2/3: Common Council Order Book, p66, TWAS. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C2/1/1, p150: Regulations for the shoremaster, 29th December 1788, Mitchell Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Journals of Ralph Jackson, 1750- 1790 transcribed by the Great Ayton History Society and available to download at http://greatayton.wikidot.com/ralph-jackson-diaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *South Carolina Gazette*, June 29th 1765. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. November 26th 1772, *South Carolina Gazette*, November 12th 1772, *South Carolina Gazette*. Accounts I found between planters and wharfingers also show that the former maintained private accounts with the latter for the storage, shipment, and sometimes packing, of not only rice but also other commodities. This kind of relationship further emphasizes how the wharf had become a privatized commercial space, rather than a public concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Aaron Leaming diary, AM 0923, Records of the Callowhill markets, both Historical Society of Pennsylvania. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Pennsylvania Gazette* and Matthew Mulcahy, “The Great Fire of 1740 and the Politics of Disaster Relief in Colonial Charleston, *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 99 (1998): 135-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *South Carolina Gazette* Aug 3rd 1747 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 1750 Street Act, *South Carolina Gazette*: “THE commissioners of the public market in town, are impowered to erect shades on a piece of land belonging to the public, being part of a low water lot fronting *Tradd-street* , for a PUBLIC MARKET, or to purchase a piece next adjoining the same on either side, or to sell the public land, and to purchase other land between Mr. *Matthews* 's ***wharfs*** and Mr. *Elliott* 's ***wharfs*** , for the use of a *Public Market* , and to erect shades, for the use of persons living in the country not following the trade of a butcher; same to remain under the directions of the commissioners of the market; the hire of the stalls to be paid in to the public treasurer till the expence of purchasing the land be reimbursed; after to be applied as the stall-rents in the other market. The whole expence to be destroyed by a general tax, provided the saint exceed not *one thousand pounds.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Pennsylvania* Gazette, August 28th 1782, STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA. IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, SATURDAY, AUGUST 17, 1782, The Bill, intituled "An Act to enable the Commissioners therein named to purchase public Landings in the District of Southwark, in the County of Philadelphia, and for raising a Fund to pay the purchase Monies thereof," [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Seth Rockman, “What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?” *Journal of the Early Republic,*  Vol. 34 (3) Fall 2014, 439-466; Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore, 2002); David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013) p14 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)