
My dissertation seeks to explain the early republican transition from merchant to industrial capitalism by analyzing the development of the New England arms and textile industries in the context of federal patronage and expanding geopolitical dominance in the Americas. Historians and present day commentators alike often emphasize individual initiative, technological innovation, and freedom from government regulation in the march from eighteenth-century mercantilism to nineteenth-century liberal capitalism; yet, a strong federal government was essential for generating economic growth in the decades following the nation’s founding.  

And while much work on industrialization has focused on the social implications wrought by economic transformations, changing labor systems, individual entrepreneurship, and the rise of the modern business firm, this project will reveal how businessmen and policymakers used the state’s nation-building capacities to create markets both at home and abroad that directly facilitated the industrialization of the North.  

The dissertation draws on the records of Congress and the War and State Departments, manufacturing companies and armories, and individual businessmen to argue that the early republican federal government shaped the development of the arms and textiles industries in New England as it pursued an agenda of military preparedness, territorial expansion, and economic growth.

As it counters what historian William Novak calls “the myth of the weak state”, this project intervenes in four areas of study: business, foreign relations, political economy, and the early national

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1 See for example, Joyce Oldham Appleby, The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism (New York: W.W. Norton Co. 2010), which synthesizes scholarship on capitalist development, including her own, argues that industrialization was a “triumph of machine design and worker enterprise” and that it was a private undertaking free from government interference.

United States. Although the state now occupies a prominent position in the history of capitalism -- a useful corrective to laissez-faire accounts of American economic development -- studies of the Industrial Revolution and business in general have largely ignored state intervention. Yet when we consider together different historiographies that are not usually in conversation with one another, we see early republican business development, diplomacy, and government-supported capitalism in a new light. An older body of scholarship on American history revealed the role of individual states in economic life, but maintained that the federal state was weak until the Civil War. More recent historians, however, underscore the importance of the early national federal government in various realms of early national economic development, often with a focus on governmental support of internal improvements or on the judicial decisions that privileged corporations. Other scholars have connected federal intervention in the economy with war-making and land acquisition. Although these studies of the early republican United States highlight the role of the federal government in the economy, they tend to marginalize actual businesses. Business histories, on the other hand, tend to privilege individuals and entrepreneurial

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personalities, while diplomacy studies often overlook the influence of business interests and the importance of markets in their discussions of ideologies and power relations. Only by connecting studies of diplomacy, political economy and business history can we begin to tell the full story about the first decades of industrialization in America.

Because my dissertation is ultimately an analysis of the influence of the federal government on the predecessors to big business in America, I am choosing to focus on a region that stands as the symbol of the beginnings of American industrial capitalism. New England is where large scale integrated textile manufacturing developed first, and it is where eighty-five percent of the nation’s small arms were produced. The study of this region’s arms and textile industries reveals the mobilization of large scale private capital and government resources in the interest of economic expansion and hemispheric dominance. In the early national period we can find the roots of a modern American economy dominated by the interest of big business, national security, and exploitation of foreign markets. These two industries—one a public investment reliant on private contracts and the other an ostensibly private investment reliant on government interventions—allow us to see the imprecise lines between public and private undertakings in a political economy that was geared toward self-sufficiency and public welfare, but that had at its heart wealth-generation.

My dissertation devotes particular attention to federal agents like William Tudor and Decius Wadsworth. William Tudor was a leading Bostonian who served as consul to Lima, Peru from 1823 to 1827. During his seven-year tenure in Peru, Tudor cultivated amiable relations with business and government leaders in his host country and functioned as a liaison for American commerce in Peru. As he

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negotiated with Peruvian officials for favorable commercial policies for US manufactured goods, he also represented the business interests of specific textile manufacturers with whom he had personal connections. The changes he effected in textile tariffs, for example, made possible the exportation to Peruvian markets of the particular types of cloth manufactured in Lowell, Massachusetts. Colonel Decius Wadsworth served as Chief of Ordnance from 1815 to 1821 and, under the oversight of the Secretary of War, pushed an aggressive agenda of improving and increasing arms production. As he renewed the contracts of successful private arms manufacturers, Wadsworth altered contract terms to conform to new standardization policies and instructed the superintendent of the federal armory at Springfield, Massachusetts to ramp up production, even if it meant exceeding Congressional appropriations. These measures were meant to ensure that the United States would never again repeat the supply and quality issues experienced during the War of 1812. Men like Wadsworth and Tudor highlight the importance of government officials in promoting economic expansion and innovation. William Tudor’s machinations in Peru prompt historians of business to rethink the autonomy of individual firms and entrepreneurs in growing industry, and scholars of foreign relations to consider early US foreign policy in Latin America as based less on an ideology of liberty and more on US business interests. Decius Wadsworth’s influence on the improvement of arms production, on the other hand, encourages historians of the early republic and political economy to rethink the efficacy of government bureaucracy in shaping industrial development and innovation and in providing the basis for a strong military, even in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The development of industrial capitalism in the early republic depended on a body of public servants like Tudor and Wadsworth.

The dissertation is divided into three parts and thus far I have written drafts of the second and third sections. The first section will provide an overview of the early republican political economy and the impetus for domestic industry, while also discussing the first forays into arms and textile manufacturing. Part Two, entitled “Stimulus”, is comprised of two chapters. Chapter Two considers the effects of international conflict on generating opportunities for the manufacturing sector by focusing on the Embargo of 1807 and the War of 1812. Chapter Three explores industrial expansion in the context of territorial expansion by analyzing as financial stimulus the claims payments that a group of Boston merchant-industrialists received as a result of the Transcontinental Treat, and by focusing on the increase in federal funding and bureaucratic oversight in the arms industry. Part Three, entitled “Dominance”, contains a chapter on commercial diplomacy in Latin America in the 1810s and 1820s that analyzes the role of US diplomats in generating trade policies favorable to American manufactured goods in the context of the Independence Wars, and a final chapter that looks ahead to American superiority in firearms and textiles by exploring technological innovations through the contract and patent systems. By the 1840s, the United States was well on its way to achieving an international industrial superiority that had been cultivated by a strong national state.
Selected Bibliography


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