Women Merchants in Colonial New York

By JEAN P. JORDAN

An intensive search of colonial New York newspapers and other sources indicates that women held a strong position in New York's mercantile life—far stronger than would be the case for another two hundred years. Dr. Jordan is a member of the Institute for Research in History, New York City.

EARLY IN 1734 in New York City, according to John Peter Zenger's Journal, a group of widows met and drafted a letter to the Journal, declaring:

We are House keepers, Pay our Taxes, carry on Trade, and most of us are she Merchants, and as we in some measure contribute to the Support of Government, we ought to be Intituled to some of the Sweets of it; but we find our selves intirely neglected, while the Husbands that live in our Neighbourhood are daily invited to Dine at Court: we have the Vanity to think we can be full as Entertaining, and make as brave a Defence in case of an Invasion, and perhaps not turn Taile so soon as some of them; and tho' we don't understand the Law, we do the Gospel, witness the seven first Verses of the 23rd Chapter of Proverbs lately put up near the Market Place. ¹

No names of any of the widows were given; and, while it is tempting to accept the letter at face value as an early display of New York feminism, the alleged widows' protest fits so neatly into the Journal's current campaign against Governor William Cosby (who was trying to win support by inviting prominent local men to dine with him at the Fort, ostensibly to discuss plans for defence against a possible French attack) that it may have been fabricated by the anti-Cosby politicians—James Alexander, William Smith Sr., Cadwallader Colden,

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Rip Van Dam, and the two Lewis Morrises, father and son—who were the Journal's backers.  

Nevertheless, the letter, even if not authentic, has significance, since it had to be credible to be effective. It may, therefore, be taken as evidence that a number of widows in New York at that time were engaged in trade, and that a significant number of them were merchants.

In eighteenth-century New York there was a substantial distinction between a merchant and a mere shopkeeper. A merchant imported, and usually exported, goods in bulk, sold at wholesale (though most sold at retail also), and owned or leased a "store"—i.e., a warehouse—which was often part of a house, not necessarily the merchant's own. While shopkeepers were middle class, merchants—along with lawyers, large landowners, and royal officials—were members of the colony's upper class.

It is well known that women in colonial American cities—especially New York, Boston, and Philadelphia—were by no means exclusively confined to the domestic occupations of housewife and servant. Women practiced the skilled trades of seamstress, milliner, and mantua-maker, which they might learn by apprenticeship, and take apprentices in their turn. Contemporary newspaper ads indicate that women might be midwives, or compound and sell proprietary remedies for a variety of ailments. They might be shopkeepers, or keepers of taverns, coffeehouses, boardinghouses, or schools, or give private lessons in various subjects. There were also those who practiced that profession alleged to be the oldest. However, that some colonial women were merchants is not generally known. Indeed, "she Merchants" have been almost as "entirely neglected" by historians as by Governor Cosby. The standard work on colonial New York merchants twice mentions one woman merchant, Mrs. Mary Alexander, alludes once to the participation of Margaret Livingston (who was not


a merchant) in a joint commercial venture with three male
Livingstons, but otherwise gives no indication that women as
well as men were merchants. A biographer of Lord Stirling
gives slightly more extensive mention of Mrs. Alexander, the
would-be Earl’s mother (though she is not listed in the index).6
Most other writers on colonial New York history give no hint
of the existence of women merchants.

A few writers of women’s history have done somewhat bet-
ter. Two books published in the 1890s, antiquarian rather than
scholarly, are sprinkled with references to several women
merchants.7 A pioneering scholarly work by Elisabeth Dexter,
first published in 1924, mentions several New York merchants

5. Harrington, New York Merchants, pp. 15, 45, 57, and passim.
7. Alice Earle, Colonial Days in Old New York (New York, 1896); May Van
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as well as others in Boston and Philadelphia and one in Newport; she did not, however, distinguish between merchants and shopkeepers.8 A more recent work mentions several women traders in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and Charlestown; it also ignores the distinction between shopkeeper and merchant.9 The authoritative Notable American Women includes forty-two "entrepreneurs," of whom seventeen are from the colonial period: six printers, five landowners, William Penn's executrix, one shopkeeper, one innkeeper, and three merchants—two in New York (Mary Alexander and Margaret Philipse) and one in Boston.10 Yet some recent works on American women or even American businesswomen mention no colonial women merchants at all.11

The chief reason so little attention has been paid to colonial women merchants is no doubt the general lack of references to them in most of the standard primary sources for the period, such as the correspondence of colonial officials with the British government; of Anglican clergy with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel; of Dutch Reformed clergy with the Classis of Amsterdam; proceedings of legislative bodies; and those diaries, letter-books, and other papers of individuals which have been preserved—mostly, in Jesse Lemisch's words, "papers of great white men," though "prominent" would be more accurate than "great." References to merchants, of course, abound in these sources; presumably colonial writers did not specifically refer to the fact that some merchants were women because it was taken for granted.

There are, however, sources which provide considerable evidence of the existence of women merchants. The most important sources are colonial newspapers—not the news columns, but the advertisements. Even when Mrs. Alexander died in 1760, her obituary in Parker's Gazette-Post-Boy

11. For example, Page Smith, Daughters of the Promised Land (Boston, 1970), and Caroline Bird, Enterprising Women (New York, 1976).
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mentioned that she was the widow of James Alexander, attorney and member of the colony's Council, that she was "Mother to the present Earl of Stirling," and that she owned large estates in New York and other colonies, but not that she was a merchant. Hugh Gaine's Mercury, in contrast, did include in her obituary the sentence, "She was for many Years past, a very eminent Trader in this Place." All three local newspapers carried advertisements, not only that year but in 1761, of goods she had ordered before her death.\(^\text{12}\)

Another useful source, especially for the period before New York had any newspapers, is the charred remnant of colonial customs records which escaped destruction in either the burning of the Custom House in 1776 or the capitol fire in Albany in 1911. Wills provide supplemental information about women merchants already identified; however, even if a merchant left his widow his entire estate, it cannot be assumed that she carried on the business. Some widows sold out—for example, Margaret Bowne, widow of merchant Robert Bowne, put up for sale his real estate, including "two large Store-Houses."\(^\text{13}\)

But many widows of merchants did carry on their late husbands' businesses, sometimes only until they remarried or until a son was old enough to take over the business, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Widows of shopkeepers and craftsmen also frequently carried on their deceased husbands' businesses. One example was Mary Jarvis, widow of James Jarvis, hatter.\(^\text{14}\) Most colonial women merchants became merchants in this way, though some exceptions will be noted. Among those who did so was Mary Alexander.

Mrs. Alexander was born in 1693, daughter of John Spratt, a Scotch immigrant who became a merchant, an alderman, and Speaker of the irregular 1689–91 Assembly during Leisler's Rebellion, and Maria De Peyster Spratt. Her father died in 1697, leaving his widow an estate valued at 1797 pounds, including a warehouse. In 1711 Mary married merchant Samuel Provoost, a member of a prominent

\(^{12}\) New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy, April 21, July 10, 17, 24, 31, August 7, 14, 21, 1760, March 26, May 21, 1761; New-York Mercury, April 21, July 14, 21, 28, August 4, 1760, April 27, 1761; Weyman's New-York Gazette, July 14, 1760, March 2, 1761.

\(^{13}\) Weekly Journal, January 2, 1744.

\(^{14}\) New-York Journal, November 17, 1774.
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Huguenot-descended family; her mother married his older brother, the celebrated merchant David “Ready Money” Provoost. Mary had three children by her first marriage. One died young and one joined the British army, but her son John became a merchant and was the father of New York’s first Episcopal Bishop, Samuel Provoost. When her husband died in 1719, she carried on his business with notable success. She was the first New York merchant to have a good sidewalk built in front of her store. She married James Alexander on New Year’s day, 1721, and bore him two sons (one of whom died young) and five daughters. Her family obligations did not prevent her from energetically and successfully continuing her career as a merchant. In fact, according to her husband, the day after giving birth to a daughter she was back at work in the store and sold goods worth more than 30 pounds. Significantly, it was considered entirely acceptable for her to remain in business when she was no longer a feme sole but had a living husband who was, moreover, a prominent attorney and Council member. Her son William, the claimant to an Earldom and later a Revolutionary general, went into her business, not into his father’s profession. Indeed, James Alexander himself took some part in her business on occasion, though much of the time before William was old enough to join the firm she was assisted only by apprentices. She aided her husband in acquiring extensive real estate holdings, and when he died in 1756 he named her his sole executrix. She dealt primarily in dry goods, but the firm handled other commodities on occasion, including slaves. She did not, as several writers have stated, obtain the supply contract for General Shirley’s expedition against Niagara. That contract went to the partnership of Livingston and Alexander, formed by her son William and Peter Van Brugh Livingston. She died a very wealthy woman, able to

provide handsomely for all her surviving children by Alexander and for John Provoost; her house and store went to William Alexander.\(^{16}\)

It is noteworthy, and a useful reminder not to assume that all merchants must have advertised, that Mrs. Alexander never advertised in the newspapers during her lifetime, apparently being sufficiently well-known and well-patronized without advertising. However, a male merchant, Henry Ludlow, advertised his store as being “opposite Mrs. Alexander's in Broad-Street.”\(^{17}\)

The other best-known woman merchant in colonial New York, Mrs. Margaret Hardenbroeck Philipse, also vigorously pursued a mercantile career despite having a husband quite capable of supporting her. She was already in business as a merchant in 1660 while married to Peter De Vries, unsuccessful patroon on Staten Island. When he died in 1661, she invested his estate in the purchase of two ships, in which she carried on trans-Atlantic trade until 1690, often sailing as supercargo on one of her ships. In 1662 she married Frederick Philipse, whom she met when he took passage on one of her ships to go to London to sell some furs. She had a daughter by her first marriage and four children by her second; one son, Adolphus Philipse, became one of the foremost merchants, landowners, and politicians in the colony and Speaker of the Assembly. Throughout her life she frequently used her maiden name for business purposes. In 1668 she joined other merchants in petitioning the Privy Council for permission for the ship *King Charles* to sail from Holland to New York, a new order having restricted such voyages to one a year (it was granted).\(^{18}\)

Two Dutch Labadists who sailed to New York on one of her ships in 1679, with the owner on board, left a vivid portrait of Mrs. Philipse in their journal. They denounced


17. *Mercury*, May 1, 1758.

“Margaret,” as they regularly call her, for “avarice” and “covetousness”; they also make it clear that everyone on board from the captain down obeyed her every whim—even if it meant delaying a voyage several hours in an effort to recover a mop that had fallen overboard. An imperious woman and a highly acquisitive capitalist she undoubtedly was, but her abilities and achievements are more impressive than her defects. Though his own abilities were considerable, she undoubtedly had a substantial part in making Philipse, who came to New Netherland in 1650 as a carpenter for the Dutch West India Company, into the richest merchant in New York, a Council member, and first lord of Philipse Manor.

The same two Labadists gave a memorable description of an unnamed Dutch woman trader they encountered at Albany in 1679:

although not of openly godless life, [she] is more wise than devout . . . She is a truly worldly woman, proud and conceited, and sharp in trading with wild people, as well as tame ones . . . This trading is not carried on without fraud, and she is not free from it . . . She has a husband, which is her second one . . . He remains at home quietly, while she travels over the country to carry on the trading. In fine she is one of the Dutch female traders, who understand the business so well.

Clearly, they considered her representative of a group of “female traders.”

The importance of the fur trade—involving both Albany fur traders and New York City merchants—in the history of New York and New Netherland is well-known. And, though historians have made little of it, custom house records indicate that a number of women were involved in this important commerce. In 1702, Mary Coler exported beaver and other furs to London. Anna Cuyler imported dry goods in 1701, exported elk skins to England in 1702, and shipped “Indian goods” and gunpowder to Albany in 1702. Hannah Noel exported beaver and other furs in 1702 and imported lead, shot, and other goods in 1703. Helena Rombouts, widow of merchant Francois Rombouts,


20. Ibid., p. 318. The term “wild people” undoubtedly refers to Indians.
exported furs to London in 1701, 1702, 1703, and 1704. She imported sugar, rum, molasses, and lime juice in 1702, rum and sugar in 1703, dry goods in 1703 and 1704, and miscellaneous goods (not including wine or rum) in 1707. She traded on a substantial scale; in July of 1702 she imported 2647 gallons of West Indian rum, and exported to London furs including 419 deerskins and 270 racoon skins. She died in 1707, leaving eight children.  


Margaret Vetch imported dry goods in 1707, exported beaver skins to Boston in 1708, imported rum in 1731, and imported wine in 1748. She was evidently in business for more than forty years, and her name is no doubt on some customs entries now illegible.

Margaret Philipse was not the only woman merchant in business before 1700. Elizabeth Van Es, daughter of an Albany magistrate, married Gerrit Bancker. After his death in 1691, she opened a store and conducted business successfully until her death in 1693. She owned a share in a brigantine. The ill-fated Jacob Leisler's widow was a merchant and also owned a mill. Lysbet Reiner, a merchant's widow, carried on a thriving business for many years, although she took a second husband, Dutch Reformed clergyman Domine Drisius. Margaret Van Schlictenhorst


23. Ibid., pp. 244, 278; New York Customs Records (microfilm), Paul Klapper Library, Queens College, City University of New York. Hereafter cited as Customs Records, Queens College.
Schuyler, widow of Philip Pieterse Schuyler, carried on his business so successfully that when she died in 1711 she could state in her will that the property had greatly increased. Her niece, Heligonda Van Schlictenhorst, a spinster, was a merchant.24

Though most New York women merchants were widows, and a few were wives, at least five of them besides Miss Van Schlictenhorst were single: Hannah Linton, Elizabeth Lawrence, Susan or Susannah Faircloth, Anne Hammersley, and a Miss Stanton. Miss Linton (several variant spellings exist), daughter of a farmer in Hempstead, Queens County, was in business as a wool merchant in 1760. Miss Lawrence, daughter of Nathaniel Lawrence, advertised a wide variety of dry goods, wholesale and retail, in 1763–64; she shared a store on Crommelin’s Wharf with one Cornelius Fisher, and they advertised together, but they were not formally partners. In 1764 she received a bequest of 100 pounds from her father’s nephew, merchant and Alderman John Lawrence. Miss Faircloth advertised a wide variety of imported dry goods, millinery, haberdashery, and toys in 1771 and 1772, first “at the Widow Waldron’s,” then at a “store” in Hanover Square, then at a new “store” in King Street. Her final notice announced that her last importation of goods from London would be sold at auction.25 “Miss Stanton and Company” was simply included in a list of importing merchants.26

Anne Hammersley was a daughter who succeeded to her mother’s business. Her father, merchant William Hammersley, died in 1752, leaving all his estate to his wife Lucretia as long as she remained a widow. Lucretia Hammersley then operated the business, selling a “Variety of European and India Goods . . . at her Store near Coenties-Market, by Wholesale or Retail,” until her death in 1760. Anne Hammersley then took over the store and operated


25. Abstracts of Wills, V, 134; VI, 345–47; Weyman’s Gazette, April 7, 14, May 5, June 9, 1760, November 14, 21, 28, December 5, 26, 1763, January 2, 9, May 14, 21, 28, October 29, 1764; Post-Boy, March 31–April 28, May 5, 19, 1760, November 10, 17, 1763; Mercury, May 6, 13, 20, 27, June 3, 10, 17, July 22, October 17, 1771, June 1–29, July 6, 13, 27, August 10, 24, October 19, 26, November 2, 1772.

it until 1772, when sale of her goods was announced.27

Apart from those engaged in the fur trade, a number of women imported goods on a sufficient scale to indicate that they were merchants in the early eighteenth century. Catherine Apples imported "sundry merchandise," including dry goods, in 1701. Sarah Bassett imported unspecified goods in 1704. Mary Bilhope (Billop?) imported cheeses and other goods in 1701. Mary Clopper imported "sundries" in 1701, and Margaret Clopper imported glasses, books, and thread in 1701, dry goods in 1702, and haberdashery, linen, corks, flannel, and lace in 1705. Helena Cooper imported rum in 1705, 1707, and 1708, and "Indian Looking Glasses" and dry goods in 1705. Ann De Peyster imported dry goods in 1702 and 1707, rum in 1706 and 1707. Susannah Eliot imported rum in 1702. Ann Fagget imported assorted goods, including frozen fish, from Boston in 1701. Mary Garretts imported wine in 1701. Mary Hill imported haberdashery and cheese in 1702.28

Elizabeth Jourdaine was already in business importing assorted merchandise in 1701, while her husband Henry, a "mariner" who owned his own ship, was still alive. In 1702 he was lost at sea with his ship, the Dolphin. He was thus unable to leave her the gold and "Elephant's Teeth" his will mentions having on board, but he did leave her an estate consisting of 200 pounds in currency and 145 gallons of rum. She continued in business as a widow at least until 1729, importing "sundries" (mostly dry goods) in 1702, dry goods and rum in 1703 and 1704, rum in 1729.29

Esther Brown, widow of merchant Saul Brown, imported and sold dry goods and alcoholic beverages. At her death in 1708 she had inventories of both valued at over 77 pounds. Catherine Lowry and Mary Marshall each imported rum in 1704, as did Sarah Mayer in 1705. Katherine Potter imported dry goods in 1701, as did Susannah Monviele in 1702. Sarah Taylor imported rum in 1705, as did Elizabeth Wessells in 1704 and 1705 and Sarah Vork in 1708.

27. Abstracts of Wills, IV, 406; Post-Boy, September 4-18, October 16, 1760; Mercury, May 25, June 1, 1772.
29. Ibid., 47, 55, 92, 114, 122, 133; Archdeacon, New York City, pp. 62-63; Abstracts of Wills, I, 317, 367-68; Customs Records, Queens College (1729).
Later in the century, Rachel Luis imported cocoa in 1729 and 1730, as did Catherine De Peyster in 1729. Catrin Sharp imported rum in 1729, as did Mary Ricketts in 1740 and Mary Valletto in 1756. Catherine Searle imported wine in 1741, as did Mary Todd in 1748 and Elizabeth Shady (?) in 1749.30

To keep customs records in proper perspective, it should be remembered that a large part of New York’s trade was carried on illegally. The many small harbors along the Long Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut coasts made the area a smugglers’ paradise. The most respected merchants, such as Council member John Watts and Elias Desbrosses, church warden of Trinity Church and third president of the chamber of commerce, evaded duties with no apparent qualms.31 There is no reason to assume that female merchants were more scrupulous in such matters than their male competitors. Hence, while the fact that a merchant paid duties in a particular year proves he or she was in business that year, not paying any duties in another year is no indication that the merchant was not in business then.

From the 1730s, newspaper advertisements replace customs records as the most useful source for identifying women merchants. Although the first New York newspaper, Bradford’s Gazette, began publication in 1725, no advertisement by a woman merchant appeared until 1733, when Marian Scott, widow of merchant John Scott, advertised snuff. In 1748 she advertised Madeira wine “by the Five Gallons, Quarter Cask, Hogshead or Pipe.”32 Other women traders advertising in the 1730s were Mary Campbell, who sold Cheshire cheese “in the Broad-Street, opposite to the Jew’s Synagogue Alley”; Widow DesBrosses, who sold olive oil and Canary wine “by the Five Gallons” in Hanover Square; Widow Leskresser, who sold the same

30. Archdeacon, New York City, p. 63; Bloch, Her Majesty’s Revenue, pp. 40, 76, 124, 163, 185, 253, 267; Customs Records, Queens College (1729, 1730, 1740, 1741, 1748, 1749, 1756).
32. New-York Gazette, June 11, 18, 25, July 2, 1733, April 25–August 1, 1748. For John Scott’s will, see Abstracts of Wills, III, 111–12.
two commodities in the same Square; Ann Sleigh, who sold Canary wine in Duke Street, and Widow Anna Vanderspiegel, who sold “all sorts of Window Glass by wholesale or Retail,” but announced her intention to turn the business over to her son John.33

It should be noted that the mention of only one or two items in a merchant’s advertisement did not mean he or she sold nothing else. Such great merchants as Philip Livingston, for example, often advertised only one item.34 Also worth noting is the difficulty of determining whether some advertisers were merchants or shopkeepers. Selling at wholesale or only in large quantities, importing on a substantial scale, or referring to a “store” rather than a “shop” may be taken as indicating a merchant. Those indicators being absent, three women listed above (Campbell, Leskresser, and Sleigh) could have been shopkeepers. Among dealers in wines and liquors, selling only by five gallons or larger quantities indicates a merchant. A municipal ordinance required licenses for retailers of wines and spirits in quantities less than five gallons; merchants could avoid this requirement by selling no less than five gallons, while shopkeepers would have to meet the needs of customers for smaller quantities. Hence, the widow Stephens, who sold Madeira wine “by the Five Gallons, or small Measure” was probably a shopkeeper.35

In the 1740s, we find advertisements by Elizabeth Crommelin, “near the Meal Market,” who sold “Choice Florence Oyl”; Ann Willson, “at the House belonging to Mr. Peter De Lancey, near the Oswego-Market,” who sold oatmeal; Hannah Isaacs, widow of merchant Abraham Isaacs, who sold “sundry sorts of Goods”; Hester Johnson, “in Smith-Street, near King-Street,” who sold sugar “by the Barrel or Hogshead”; and Ann Alsop, widow of merchant Thomas Alsop (who died in 1746), who sold sugar, raisins,


oatmeal, pepper, chocolate, coffee, writing paper, and sealing wax.36

In addition, Flora Breese, widow of John Breese, "Leather Dresser," sold "by whole Sale or Retail . . . all sorts of Skins Drest and Dyed as also, Allum, cóperas, Raspt Logwood, &,c. and . . . sundry Materials for Boyling of Gleu." As a Wholesaler, and importer of such materials as logwood (a West Indian dyestuff), she could be considered a merchant. In 1745, John Browne, "lately married to the Widow Breese," announced that he was now carrying on the business.37

A larger number of women merchants first advertised in the 1750s. The "Widow Catherine Beekman, at Beekman's Slip," sold a variety of earthenware imported from Liverpool, wholesale or retail.38 Mary Elliston, "In the Broad-

36. Weekly Journal, May 4-June 29, 1741; Post-Boy, September 2, 9, 16, 1745, June 22, 29, November 16-December 28, 1747, January 4, 11, 1748, February 27-March 20, 1749; Mr. Isaacs died in 1743, Mrs. Isaacs in 1745. Abstracts of Wills, III, 427, IV, 55, 483.


38. Mercury, February 20, 27, March 13, 20, 27, 1758. She was the widow (nee Van Horne) of Cornelius Beekman (d. 1754). The other Catherine Beekman
Way, near the Lutheran Church," sold "An Assortment of European and India Goods—Also, Choice Madeira and Vidonia Wines, by the five Gallons, or larger Quantity." Mrs. Anne Grant sold wines, rum, brandy, gin, oil, sugar, spices, mustard, coffee, tea, snuff, chocolate, currants and raisins, candles, anchovies and capers, dyes, paper, ink powder, and copperas (by the hundredweight), wholesale or retail. She was the widow of Donald Grant, was previously married to Alexander McPherson, and died in 1770. Widow Catherine Heysham, whose husband Thomas had died in 1751, sold a variety of garments and textiles, cutlery, saddles, handkerchiefs, cheese, ale, sugar, "&c, &c," all "Just imported." Mahetabel Hylton, widow of Captain Ralph Hylton, sold "a large assortment of European and East India Goods," also cordage, earthenware, pimento, pepper, snuff, bar iron, bar lead, gunpowder, shot, pipes, candles, and Madeira wine. Elizabeth Phenix, in Beaver Street, sold indigo, tea, rice, pepper, "and all Sorts of . . . Goods, both European and India." Margaret Todd, widow of Robert, sold Madeira wine "by the Pipe, Quarter-Cask, or five Gallons." Catherine Van Horne, widow of merchant Abraham Van Horne, sold Muscovado sugar by the barrel or hogshead. The daughter of brewer Harmanus Rutgers, she had one son and four daughters. When her husband died in 1756, he left her most of his estate. Elizabeth Tittle sold men's, women's and children's clothing, fabrics, snuff boxes, pewter dishes, "and sundry other Goods too tedious to mention," and at least once imported and sold a "parcel" of slaves.39

39. Post-Boy, May 25, June 1, 1752, July 9-August 13, 1753, April 22-May 27, September 16, October 14, 28, November 4–18, 1754, April 5, 19, 26, May 3, 10, 24, November 1, 8, December 13, 1756, November 6–December 23, 1758; Weyman's Gazette, December 12, 1763–February 13, 1764; Mercury, June 4–June 6, 1753, February 18–April 8, 1754, November 6–December 23, 1758, September 10, 24, October 1, 8, 22, December 17–31, 1759, January 14–26, February 11–25, March 10, 24, April 21, 28, May 5, 19, July 6, August 4, October 13, 27, November 4, 24, 1760, February 16, 23, March 2, 16, May 11–25, June 8, 22, 1761, July 12–August 2, September 13, 1762, December 5, 12, 1763, January 23, 30, July 23, September 17, November 12, December 3, 1754, October 7–21, 1765; Abstracts of Wills, IV, 57, 329–30, 445–50, V, 131–32, 431, VII, 373–74; Customs Records, Queens College (1740).
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Other advertisers included Rebecca Semple, who imported and sold Scotch snuff. When she died, her executor advertised her stock of snuff, pie pans, boilers, kettles, and warming pans, and also her still, of sixty gallons capacity, which indicates that she was also a distiller. She was the widow of merchant James Semple, who died in 1754, leaving her a “store house” among other property, and was the daughter of merchant Jasper Bosch, who died in 1756, leaving her half of his estate and naming her his executrix.40

Frances Willett, in Wall Street, sold rum by the hogshead, sugar, molasses, and logwood. She also owned two ships, a schooner and a snow trading between New York and Saint Kitts, and contracted for transport of freight and passengers on them. Her husband Richard had died in 1722, so she may have been in business many years before she began advertising. Also in Wall Street was Mary Derham, who called herself a “Milliner” and her establishment a “Shop,” but who imported and sold a large assortment of “millenary, haberdashery, mercery, and perfumery,” also tea, snuff, jewelry, and “shaving equipages.” As a large-scale importer, she was evidently the feminine counterpart of a “Merchant Taylor” like Ennis Graham (a frequent advertiser in colonial New York newspapers), and so could be considered a merchant. There exists a reference to “Mrs. Groesbeek’s Storehouse, on the New-Dock.” She was Anne, widow of merchant John Groesbeek, who became a freeman of the City of New York in 1728, and died in 1752, leaving her his “store house,” among other properties, but only until their son John became of age.41

Privateering, especially during the French and Indian War, was a profitable sideline for some New York merchants, and the means by which some men of lower socioeconomic status acquired the capital to become merchants. While it cannot be assumed that no woman had the neces-

sary personal qualities for privateering (after all, Ann Bonny and Mary Reade had been celebrated pirates), letters of marque would not have been issued to a woman. A woman might have owned such a vessel, or at least a share in one. But names of women are not to be found among even partial owners of privateersmen, at least during the golden age of privateering, from 1756 to 1763.42

The 1760s saw a striking increase in the number of women merchants—at least of those who advertised in newspapers. Besides Ann Grant, Elizabeth Lawrence, and Mary Derham, already mentioned, there were “Captain Berton’s Mother,” located first “at the North-River” and subsequently “in New Dutch Church-Street,” who sold “Flint and Delph Ware,” wholesale or retail; Mrs. Jane Blundell, who imported and sold grass and garden seed, barley, oatmeal, vegetables, “Durham Flour of Mustard,” and birdseed; Anne De Visme, who sold “a good Assortment of European and India Goods” (insolvent Albany merchant Alexander Montgomery assigned his entire estate to her and David Shaw to satisfy his debts); and Rebecca Gomez, “Next Door to the Merchant’s Coffee-House,” who sold tea, wholesale or retail, by the hundredweight or less. Her husband, merchant Mordecai Gomez, died in 1750, leaving her only part of his estate, with use of his “store house” only for a year.43

Widow Cornelia Blaau is of particular interest because she was not a merchant’s widow. Her husband Jurry, who died in 1759, was a farrier in Gowanus, King’s County; they had eight children. She was the sister of merchant Richard Waldron, who died in 1775. Presumably he assisted her, at least with advice, in setting herself up in business. She sold wines, liquors, sugar, coffee, tea, cheese, bottles, beeswax, “and sundry other Things.”44

43. Post-Boy, April 28-May 26, June 16, 1760, April 25-May 16, 1765; Weyman’s Gazette, September 13, 20, October 4, 25, November 1, 1762, December 17-31, 1764, January 14, 28, February 11-25, March 11, April 29, May 13, 1765, January 13-May 19, June 9, 23, July 7-August 4, 1766, February 9-April 6, May 4, 18, 25, October 5-November 9, 1767; Mercury, October 29-November 12, 1764, April 21-May 5, 1766, January 18-February 8, February 29-March 28, April 11, 1768, January 16, 30, February 6-20, 1769, April 23-June 11, June 25, November 19, 1770, March 9-June 1, 1772, March 1-29, 1773, February 28-May 16, December 5, 12, 26, 1774, January 1, 23, 1775; Journal, January 19, 26, February 2, 23, 1769, May 2, 16, 23, 1771; Abstracts of Wills, IV, 310-12.
Contemporary newspaper ads also mention the widow Hetty Hays, a frequent advertiser from 1760 to 1775, who specialized in all sorts of pickles and sweetmeats, available in kegs or crocks, but who also sold oil, vinegar, pomatum, mangoes, nuts, and dry goods. Other advertisers include: Abigail Hazard, dry goods dealer; the widow Ireland, "near the Baptist Meeting-House," who sold logwood; Mrs. Anne Ramsay, "in the Broad-way, near the Bowling-Green," who sold "West-India Sweet-Meats," pineapples, oranges, lemons, limes, citron, and "other West-India Fruits and Roots," as well as pickles, rosewater, onions, beans, gooseberries, and oysters; Sarah Steele, widow of merchant Thomas Steele (who died in 1763), who sold wines, liquors, beer, capers, and pickles, wholesale or retail; and Ann Van Horne, widow of merchant Geritt Van Horne, who sold wines, sugar, brandy, Cheshire cheese, "&c." Mrs. Van Horne, sister of the eminent merchant Lawrence Reade, died in 1773, wealthy enough to leave each of her four daughters 200 pounds before dividing the rest of her estate equally among all her children. Mrs. Mary Phillips, who sometimes advertised as "M. Phillips," from 1766 to 1775 imported and sold "at her Store in Smith-Street" a large assortment of millinery and hosiery. And Sarah M'Cullume sold "all Sorts of Dry Goods," as well as tea, sugar, barley, oatmeal, coffee, cheese, vinegar, and chocolate, wholesale and retail. She evidently had some difficulties, as two meetings of her creditors were announced, but apparently reached satisfactory terms with them, since no announcement of sale of her goods to satisfy them followed.

44. Ibid., V, 317, VIII, 239–41; Post-Boy, August 28, September 6, October 2, 1766; Mercury, August 26, 1771; Journal, September 11, October 2, 16, 30, November 6–December 4, 1766, February 12, March 19, April 2, 16, 1767, July 18, 25, August 1, 22, 1771.

45. Post-Boy, October 17-31, 1765, January 2–February 6, 1769; Weyman’s Gazette, April 28, May 5, August 18–25, December 22, 29, 1760, January 5, May 4, 18, September 7, 14, 1761, January 16, September 19, 24, 1764, January 14, 21, February 11, December 30, 1765, January 6, 20, 27, February 3–24, April 14, 21, May 5, 19, 26, September 1–22, November 17, 24, December 1, 15, 29, 1766, February 2, May 11–June 29, September 28, October 12, November 16, 1767; Mercury, November 4, 10, December 22, 29, 1760, January 5, 1761, January 11, 18, March 1, 8, 1762, March 5, 19, 1764, March 20, 27, 1769, February 12, 19, August 20–September 10, 1770, September 9, 16, 1771, January 23–February 13, 1775; Journal, May 9, 23, 30, 1771, January 16–30, 1772.
Less fortunate, perhaps, was Anne Waddell, widow of merchant John Waddell. She sold, “at her Store in Dock-street,” a “large Assortment of European and India Goods,” including dry goods, brandy, rum, Madeira wine, cheese, books, sugar (by the hoghead), German steel, Holland teakettles, and tea; but in 1763 she announced that she was going out of business and hence disposing of her goods “as low as can be imported,” with a still lower price for anyone who would buy them all. However, that may have been merely a retirement instead of a failure, since she was in comfortable circumstances when she died in 1773. She owned a home in the village of Harlem, a vault in Trinity Churchyard, and a substantial part of the Hardenbergh Patent in Ulster County. She had three daughters and two surviving sons, two other sons having died. Her will directed that her “negroes, sedan, carriages, sleds, and other furniture” be sold, and stated, “I have an account in my books against my son William, and he has some accounts against me, and I am left to guess, as I do, that my ballance is about £600, and rather more, and he shall have £600 less than my other children.”

Mrs. Waddell may or may not have suffered commercial reverses; but some women were undoubted successes. Martha Carrick called her establishment a “Shop” in her earlier advertisements, but in 1761 moved into the store formerly occupied by merchant William Gililland. She sold a variety of “European and East-India Goods,” includ-
ing dry goods, sugar, tea, coffee, and spices, wholesale and retail, until she announced in 1763 that she would henceforth sell only at wholesale. She is thus an apparent example of a woman who started as a shopkeeper and became a merchant.  

The vicissitudes of business are well illustrated by Elizabeth Colvill (Colvil, Colvell, Colwell), who called herself a "milliner" and "shopkeeper," but could be classified as a merchant on the same basis as Mary Derham—she also was a largescale importer of women's and men's clothing. In 1766 she announced the intention to "decline business for the present," offering her goods on sale. If she ever actually went out of business, she was in business again within a few months, having moved from Hanover Square to near the Oswego Market. In 1771 she was back on Hanover Square. In 1775, having moved to lower Broad Street, she once more announced that she was going out of business, and this time apparently did so.  

An example of one woman merchant succeeding another is provided by Sarah White, who moved from Hanover Square to Catherine Beekman's former store at Beekman's Slip. There she sold a wide variety of women's, men's, and children's clothing, dolls, Holland teakettles, English pewter, "tea, coffee, chocolate, sugar, rum, molasses, rice, cotton, lemons, whiting by wholesale and retail, &c, &c, &c, &c, &c, &c, &c, &c." Records of merchant James Beekman show that she did a larger volume of business with him than any man in the city except one during the war years 1756-63. Other women merchants who had substantial dealings with him were Lucretia Hammersley and Elizabeth Phenix.  

There were also several women who cannot definitely

48. Weyman's Gazette, December 1-17, 1760, January 26, 1761; Mercury, December 1, 22, 1760, February 2, 9, May 11, 18, 25, 1761, February 8, 15, May 3, 17, 24, 31, June 7, 14, July 19, 26, 1762, March 21, 28, 1763. Her husband, Thomas (d. 1760), left her only one-fifth of his estate, and did not name her his executrix. Abstracts of Wills, VI, 10.

49. Mercury, November 22, 29, 1762, June 4, 11, 1764, April 15, 22, 1765, December 15–29, 1766, January 1, 5, 12, 26, May 11, 18, June 8, 1767, November 11–December 2, 1771, May 22, 1775; Weyman's Gazette, February 22, March 1–22, April 5, 1762.

be classified as merchants or as shopkeepers on the basis of their advertisements or other available evidence: Mary Branson, "on Cruger’s Wharf," who sold arrack; Mrs. Coone, who sold all sorts of dry goods, and Mary Rodman, who sold preserved ginger.51

This evidence clearly shows that numbers of women competed successfully, some eminently, in the world of colonial commerce. It did not follow, however, that they had a voice in the political decisions of the day even when such decisions affected their business. A meeting of New York merchants in 1775 adopted a non-importation agreement. Women merchants were not invited and did not take part; the announcement referred only to "Gentlemen Merchants"—perhaps an honorific term in that context, but certainly directed to the exclusion of women merchants.52

The women were, of course, expected to abide by the non-importation agreement, which would otherwise have lost some of its effect, and they did so; but they did not participate in deciding on that policy.

That was in keeping with the general exclusion of women from political decision-making in that period. The franchise in New York was limited to those with a freehold or life tenancy valued at £40, and to freemen of the cities of New York and Albany. This did not legally prohibit women from voting, and many would have qualified. In fact, two elderly widows, no doubt owners of sufficient freeholds, actually voted in an Assembly election in Queens County in 1737. The Gazette wryly noted, "it is said, those two old Ladies will be chosen Constables for the next year." Earlier, Lady Deborah Moody, widow of a baronet and leader of the English Baptists who settled Gravesend in Kings County, was asked by Governor Stuyvesant and his Council in 1655 to nominate magistrates for Gravesend. Apart from these two instances, however, the force of custom was sufficient to keep women from participating in elections. As for holding office, the closest any woman came to it was the appointment in 1710 of Ariantie Dow, widow of the previous incumbent, as City Scavenger—a

51. Mercury, December 29, 1766, January 5, 26, September 21, 28, 1767; Weyman’s Gazette, March 11, 1765.
52. Post-Boy, October 31, November 7, 1765.
Women Merchants

precursor of later Sanitation Commissioners; but she was a contractor rather than an official.53

One became a freeman of New York either by completing an apprenticeship in the city or by a payment of money, set at £3 for a “Merchant, Trader, or Shopkeeper” in 1738, increased to £5 in 1751. A city ordinance further required all retailers or handicraftsmen to be freemen,54 but the requirement seems to have been entirely unenforced as far as women were concerned; otherwise, women who were not freemen would hardly have advertised that they sold at retail, as so many did. Fifteen women did become freemen in the years from 1691 through 1731, but none did between 1731 and 1776. Although the occupations of most men becoming freemen were listed, of the women only Elizabeth Ellison, seamstress (1700), is listed as anything except “widow” or “spinster.”55 If any of them were merchants, the record does not show it. The requirement that retailers be freemen not being enforced against them, and the voting privilege being in practice unavailable to them, it is understandable that women merchants and shopkeepers saw no reason to become freemen.

When the New York Chamber of Commerce, the first in America, was founded in 1768 to facilitate collective action by merchants on common problems (only one of its several objectives was political—“procuring such laws as may be found necessary for the benefit of trade”), all merchants were formally eligible for membership, without reference to sex. However, no woman became a member, nor attempted to do so. The force of custom was evidently sufficient to deter them.56

Women merchants did have one chance to stand up and be counted in 1770, when Parliament repealed all the Townshend duties except that on tea. A poll was taken of merchants

54. Minutes Common Council, I, 222, IV, 21, VI, 326; Weekly Journal, April 3, 1738.
55. Burghers and Freemen, pp. 54, 60, 61, 64, 75, 93, 100, 106, 109, 110, 116 and passim.
and other residents in New York on the question of resuming importation of British goods other than tea. The *Gazette-Post-Boy*, which favored continuing non-importation, printed lists of merchants and shopkeepers on either side of the question. Of the sixteen women merchants included in those lists (which were incomplete, some known merchants of both sexes appearing on neither), fourteen favored resuming importation of all British goods except tea, while only two opposed it.57 While a majority of male merchants also favored resuming importation, they did so by a much smaller margin of 704 to 403.58 It should not be concluded that the women were less patriotic than the men. Non-importation probably tended to bear harder on the women. None of them were among the wealthiest merchants, who had been best able to build up large inventories to tide them over a prolonged boycott. The women were almost certainly less able to obtain goods (legally or illegally) from non-British sources than some of their male competitors. They may also have felt less attachment to a policy they had had no share in formulating.

It is also significant that of the sixteen women merchants on the two lists, only one (Anne Hammersley) could be identified as a merchant from newspaper advertisements.59 This suggests that the actual number of women merchants was substantially larger than would be concluded from advertisements alone.

A few women merchants first appear in ads in the 1770s. Besides the aforementioned Susan Faircloth, there were Sarah Bancker, widow of merchant Richard Bancker, who sold dry goods and cutlery; Elizabeth Schuyler, administratrix of the estate of merchant Myndert Schuyler, who sold dry goods; Elizabeth Van Dyck, who sold wines and brandies, parchment and paper, china, fish, and cordage; Judith Brasher, possibly a shopkeeper, in Wall Street, who sold


58. Counting "merchant taylors" but not "vendue masters" as merchants. Among shopkeepers, men opposed resuming importation by 41 to 32, but all fourteen women favored resuming imports.

59. The *Post-Boy* listed Elizabeth Colvill, Mahetabel Hylton, and Mary Phillips as shopkeepers whom I have classified as merchants, albeit borderline cases.
starch; Judith Kilburn, who sold painters’ supplies, wholesale and retail; Mrs. Lynch, in Broad Street, who sold Irish indentured servants imported from Cork; and Mary Valentine, possibly a shopkeeper, who sold surveying and drawing instruments. Mrs. Valentine (nee Doyle) and her husband Thomas, who died in 1773, were immigrants from Ireland. He left her most of his estate, including a tract of land in Charlotte County and a large claim against the Province of New York for his service in surveying the New York-Quebec boundary. The Assembly voted her £300 to satisfy that claim.  

A just estimation of women’s share in colonial New York’s merchant activity cannot ignore two other women whose primary occupation was not that of merchant. When John Peter Zenger died in 1746, his widow Catherine published the Weekly Journal and carried on his job printing business until January 1, 1749, when she turned them over to her son John. While primarily a printer, she also imported and sold books, and sold other articles such as “Bonnet-Paper,” wholesale and retail. She continued selling books even after giving up the printing business. Cornelia Rutgers operated a brewery for fourteen years, from the death of her husband Anthony in 1746 until her own death in 1760. Though primarily a brewer, she was evidently a merchant, also, since she was a substantial wine importer, and her death occasioned the sale of a large stock of European merchandise she had recently imported. It is worth mention that her widowed daughter, Elizabeth Rutgers, was also a brewer, operating a brewery she inherited from her father-in-law Harmanus Rutgers in 1753 until her death in 1772.  

60. Journal, June 8, 22, 29, 1775. Her husband died in April, 1775, aged 48; they had one daughter. Abstracts of Wills, VIII, 283. Mercury, April 23, May 7–28, June 11, July 9–August 6, 1770, November 30, December 14, 1772, May 10, 17, June 14, 21, 1773, October 9, 1775; Rivington’s Gazetteer, March 24, 1774.  

Technically, one did not buy indentured servants, but only a number of years of their time. But it was standard colonial practice to speak of buying and selling them; they were advertised under the same “To be sold” heading as merchandise. One merchant included in the same advertisement indentured servants, slaves, and Cheshire cheese. Gazette, August 28–September 11, 1732.  


62. Weekly Journal, September 1, 1746 through January, 1750, May 28, 1772; Post-Boy, December 17, 1750, February 24, 1752; Mercury, May 19, 1760;
In all, sixty probable women merchants have been identified from advertisements in colonial New York newspapers. If the eleven who might have been shopkeepers and the three whose primary occupations were, respectively, leather dresser, printer, and brewer are subtracted, forty-six remain. To them must be added thirty-nine additional names identified from customs records, fifteen from the 1770 lists of importers and non-importers, and six from other sources, for a total of 106. There were undoubtedly others; but the fact that there were at least 106 women merchants in New York in the years from 1660 through 1775 is too significant to be ignored.

It is impossible to determine precisely what proportion of merchants were women, since precise figures for either the number of women merchants or the total number of merchants are not available. Elisabeth Dexter estimated, on the basis of advertisements in a Boston newspaper in the first six months of 1773, that 9.5 percent of colonial traders (merchants and shopkeepers) were women. However accurate that figure may be for Boston, it seems clearly too high for New York. Probably the best “sample” is provided by the *Post-Boy*’s 1770 lists of importers and non-importers. Although not every merchant was included, an effort was obviously made to include as many merchants on both sides as possible. They show sixteen women out of 1123 merchants, or 1.4 percent. If the three women they listed as shopkeepers and I classed as merchants are added, the figures would be nineteen out of 1126, or 1.7 percent. It seems safe to estimate that not more than 2 percent of New York merchants were women in the colonial period.

To put that figure in perspective, it must be remembered that merchants were at the summit of the colonial economy. In today’s vastly larger and more complex economy, positions of comparable power and prestige would be those of president or chairman of the board of major business corporations. In 1972, census figures indicate that women constituted 17 percent of all non-farm “managers, officials, and proprietors,” but held 2 percent or less of top

*Abstracts of Wills*, IV, 91–92, 445–50, V, 381–82; Customs Records, Queens College (1747).

management positions in business. In that year, women owned 401,025 businesses, whose $8.1 billion gross was 1 percent of total business receipts. Of ninety-five women executives in a 1973 American Management Association study, only five were corporation presidents, though one of those was president of three corporations. Also in 1973, Fortune found only eleven women among the three highest-paid officers of its 1000 leading industrial corporations and among the fifty largest in each of six non-industrial fields. Women apparently are only now winning the proportion of high-level economic positions they had in the colonial period.

Mary Alexander and Margaret Philipse were probably the only women who ranked among the foremost merchants of their time. But the others played a creditable part in the commerce of what was always an intensely commercial city. The average woman merchant inherited her business, but so did many male merchants. Some women merchants were in business only for a short time; but Mary Alexander was in business for forty-one years, and so was Margaret Vetch. Margaret Philipse was in business for thirty years, Frances Willett for a probable thirty-seven years, Elizabeth Jourdaine for twenty-eight years, Mahetabel Hylton for at least seventeen years, Marian Scott and Hetty Hays for at least fifteen, Elizabeth Colvill for at least thirteen. And Lucretia and Anne Hammersley operated a business for a combined total of twenty years. Women merchants most frequently dealt in dry goods, food, and alcoholic beverages, but there was hardly an article in the city's commerce in which some woman did not trade. Statistics on the volume of their trade and their profits or losses would be valuable, but the data are not available. The extant papers even of Mary Alexander, who was not only an eminent merchant but had a famous husband and a famous son, are too fragmentary for the sort of reconstruction of her business which has been possible for a few male merchants of colonial New York.

Linda Grant DePauw notes that Dutch women in New

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York legally had more commercial opportunity than that granted by English law and custom. However, New York women merchants were a cross-section of the same ethnic groups—Dutch, English, French, Scotch, Irish, and Jewish—to which male merchants belonged. Other ports such as Boston and Philadelphia, with no Dutch background, also had women merchants. And England had its own tradition of women in trade. Women were merchants, some of them on a large scale, in fourteenth and fifteenth century London; they belonged to nearly all the guilds. Married women might trade as “sole merchants,” in which event their husbands had no control over their businesses and no liability for their debts. Equity courts upheld that “Custom of London” against the Common Law doctrine giving a husband control of his wife's property. Bristol also had women merchants.

It does seem clear that, as several writers have maintained, economic opportunities for women narrowed after the Revolution. Elisabeth Dexter did find a number of women, mostly in New England and mostly dealing in dry goods, engaged in trade in the period from the Revolution to 1830. But they were almost exclusively shopkeepers or even street vendors. The colonial type of women merchants—importers, exporters, wholesalers—were gone. In the early nineteenth century the ideology of “true womanhood” developed, which maintained that woman was morally superior to man, and should remain apart from the competitive, corrupting spheres of business and politics. Exclusion from politics was nothing new, but that from business was. For upper class women, who of course were

65. DePauw, Four Traditions, pp. 10-11. DePauw is correct in delineating the position accorded business women in the laws of colonial New York, but errs in ascribing it only to the Dutch. In fact, her striking example of a woman’s business activities and the husband's admiration thereof (pp. 5-7) is that of half Scotch Mary Alexander and her Scotch husband.


those best able to become merchants, the new ideal was that of the “lady”—the woman of conspicuous wealth and leisure who was ornamental rather than useful, or useful only in activities not economically gainful.68 This was in sharp contrast to the ethos of colonial New York, in which industrious, enterprising upper class women, such as Mary Alexander and Margaret Philipse, were admired.