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Local Merchants and the Regional Economy of the Connecticut River Valley

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Local Merchants and the Regional Economy of the Connecticut River Valley

Gerald F. Reid

This paper focuses on valley/hill town interactions and regional economic processes in the upper Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[1] Merchants, those individuals involved in the trading and movement of commodities, are an especially useful point of departure for investigating such concerns because they operated in the economic space between communities, towns, and regions. Attention to their activities is likely to tell us a good deal about economic interaction across space and over long distances in early America and, specifically, about economic interactions between valley towns and hill towns in the Connecticut River Valley during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The account and day books of merchants are especially useful in this regard because they record, often in minute detail, the owner's transactions with customers, business partners, employees, and other merchants, the timing of such transactions, and the goods, cash, and labor involved. In this paper, the account and day books of four Greenfield area merchants are examined. The records of Caleb Alvord, Caleb Alvord Jr., Sylvester Allen, and Robert Williams cover the period from 1795 to 1823.[2] Valley

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1. A version of this paper was delivered at the colloquium on "Hills and Valleys: Upland and Lowland Towns in Western Massachusetts, 1750-1860," held at Historic Deerfield, March 22, 1986.

2. Caleb Alvord and Caleb Alvord Jr., Account Book, 1795-1813; Sylvester Allen, Account Book, 1815-1825; Robert Williams, Day Books, 1817-1823. The Alvord

town/hill town interactions and regional economic processes in the Greenfield area are viewed from the perspective of these merchants.

The economy of the Connecticut River Valley during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was in part an agricultural export economy. The agricultural export economy developed during the seventeenth century as a product of the suitability of the valley lowlands for grain production and the abundance of forests in the uplands; valley grains and forest products were in demand in Europe and elsewhere in the northern colonies and, thus, brought much needed hard currency and European imports.[3] The agricultural export economy became firmly established during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, with the development of plantation agriculture in the West Indies and the consequent new and growing demands for agricultural staples and forest production.[4]

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries farm production in the Connecticut River Valley was generalized, oriented in part to household needs and local demands, but also to generating some marketable surpluses that provided households with the ability to purchase the produce and finished and unfinished goods which they could not or did not produce themselves. Key participants in this economy were the merchants in river towns and their agents or small-scale traders in country stores, who gathered together the small surpluses of individual farms, processed and prepared them for shipment, and moved them to the major "bulking" points at Northampton or Springfield, Massachusetts, and Hartford or Middletown, Connecticut.[5] There the surpluses were assembled with the goods and produce of other

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and Allen account books and the Williams day books are filed at the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Library, Deerfield.

3. Howard S. Russell, A Long Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1982), pp. 22-23, 37; William B. Weeden, Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789 (Boston, 1963), pp. 833-834.

4. Russell, A Long Deep Furrow, p. 35.

5. Margaret E. Martin, "Merchants and Trade in the Connecticut River Valley, 1750-1820," Smith College Studies in History 24 (1839); Robert Paynter, Models of Spatial Inequality (New York, 1982).

merchants, loaded onto sloops and schooners, and shipped to major ports such as Boston and New York, and from there on to the southern colonies, the West Indies, and Europe.[6] Some valley merchants operated on a larger scale and managed considerable trade with the southern colonies and the West Indies. Hartford merchants, in particular, were concerned with the West Indies trade. They exported cattle, horses, foodstuff, lumber, and home manufactures, and in return obtained sugar, molasses, rum, salt, and other tropical produce, which they sold to their clients in the Connecticut River Valley or to merchants in Boston and other major ports.[7]

Few Connecticut River Valley merchants had direct access to European trade goods; rather, by means of the profits and credits earned in the West Indies and coastal trade, they purchased stocks of European goods from the larger mercantile firms in the major port cities. Very often it was the case that the larger and more successful valley merchants sold their stock of imported goods on a wholesale basis to smaller merchants and traders, who then sold directly to consumers.[8] By the second half of the eighteenth century, this export-import trade was active enough and expanding sufficiently to support a growing number of merchants.[9]

The high point of the agricultural export economy in the Connecticut River Valley was reached during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the West Indies trade boomed and demand for the region's agricultural and forest products peaked. Accompanying this economic expansion was a geographical expansion of the agricultural export economy. As the edge of the export economy was pushed further into western and northern New England, the Greenfield area emerged as an important point of exchange in the upper Connecticut River Valley for the bulking of agricultural and forest products and the distribution of imported trade goods and produce. When canal

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6. Martin, "Merchants and Trade."

7. Ibid., p. 14.

8. Ibid., pp. 15-16.

9. Ibid., p. 12.

systems were completed on the Connecticut River around the falls at Hadley and Montague in the early nineteenth century, it became possible for river traffic to reach the Greenfield area with heavy trade goods. That increased the importance of Greenfield's role as a bulking and distribution point for the upper Connecticut River Valley.[10]

During the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, the valley economy shifted away from agricultural exports and gradually reorganized around manufacturing, commerce, and agriculture geared to the demands of domestic urban and industrial markets. This transition was brought about by a number of factors, but principal among these were the interruptions in foreign trade in the period preceding and during the War of 1812 and the decline after 1815 in European and West Indian demand for American agricultural staples. In effect, these developments served to deflect capital investment from foreign trade and into domestic commerce and manufacturing.[11] Initially, valley merchants and merchant capital played a key role in this transition, through investments in the region's transportation, financial, and industrial infrastructure. By the 1840s, however, external, especially Boston-based, capital interests were attracted to the region and provided the driving force behind the regional economic development.[12]

The mercantile operations of Caleb Alvord and Caleb Alvord Jr. in many ways reflected the organization of merchant activities in the Connecticut River Valley during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Caleb Alvord was a resident of Bernardston, whose trading activities during the 1790s were based in Greenfield and at Cheapside Landing on the

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10. Francis M. Thompson, History of Greenfield, 1682-1800 (Greenfield, 1904), pp. 506-507; Paul Jenkins, The Conservative Rebel (Greenfield, 1982), pp. 50-51.

11. Martin, "Merchants and Trade"; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: Mentalite in Pre-Industrial America", William and Mary Quarterly 35 (1978): 193; Douglas C. North, The Economic Growth of the United States (New York, 1966), pp. 67-68, 71-73, 182-187.

12. Martin, "Merchants and Trade"; Vera Shlakman, Economic History of a Factory Town: A Study of Chicopee, Massachusetts (New York, 1969), pp. 24-47; Gerald F. Reid, "Dependence to Development: A World Systems Analysis of Elite Formation in Greenfield, Massachusetts, 1770s-1840s," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, 1987.

Connecticut River in Deerfield. According to the accounts of his business dealings, Alvord's trade consisted of buying up agricultural produce from local farmers and selling them imported and domestic goods. It is not clear when Alvord began this trade, but it certainly began by 1795. By 1796, he had joined in business with two associates and operated under the name of "Caleb Alvord and Company."[13] At that time, the company was advertising the sale of European and West Indian goods and was taking in exchange a variety of agricultural products, including wheat, rye, flax seed, beans, and cattle.[14] In 1797, this partnership was dissolved, but Alvord remained in business on his own.[15] By the early 1800s, Alvord's advertisements no longer appeared in the local newspaper, which may indicate that he had left the merchant trade or retired from active business life.

Caleb Alvord Jr. appears to have begun his own mercantile ventures at about this same time, perhaps succeeding his father in business. By 1805 he was working in partnership with Pliny Alvord of Montague at Cheapside Landing, where they were engaged in the import-export trade and also in running cargoes on the Connecticut River between Hartford and Cheapside Landing and north a short distance to Northfield.[16] In 1808, they dissolved their partnership, but resumed it again in 1810.[17] In 1811, Caleb Alvord Jr. was joined in business by Alfred Alvord, who prior to this time had conducted trade in Erving's Grant. Under the name of "C. and A. Alvord," the partnership operated at Cheapside Landing, selling salt, rum, sugar, molasses, coffee, rice, spices, and other goods, and accepting in trade and exporting forest products and agricultural products such as pork, flax seed, and cheese.[18] In addition, "C. and A. Alvord" continued to

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13. The existence of Alvord's partnership at this time is indicated in his accounts of business dealings with Hartford, New York, and other merchants in 1796. These accounts are initially entered under the name of "Alvord, Smith and Wells."

14. Greenfield Gazette, June 23 to September 22, 1796.

15. Ibid., June 15, 1797.

16. Ibid., August 12, 1805.

17. Ibid., May 30, 1808 and June 26, 1810.

18. The Traveller, May 28, 1811.

operate the freighting business between Cheapside and Hartford. As with Caleb Alvord, it is difficult to determine how long Caleb Alvord Jr. remained in the mercantile business, but judging from his surviving accounts it was at least until 1813.

The extant records of the Alvords' mercantile operations consist of Caleb Alvord's credit and debit accounts between November of 1795 and April of 1796 and the details of his accounts with wholesale merchants for a two and a half year period beginning in January of 1796. The records also detail Caleb Alvord Jr.'s accounts with wholesalers in 1809 and 1810 and his transactions for the sale and purchase of local goods and labor from August of 1812 through March of 1813.

Between November of 1795 and April of 1796, Caleb Alvord's trade in agricultural produce and imported and domestic goods involved transactions with 108 different clients. An examination of the distribution of Alvord's clients by their town of residence shows that all of his trade was restricted to the region west of the Connecticut River. Some clients were located as far as forty miles away in Westminster, Vermont, but for the most part they were concentrated in Greenfield and the adjacent towns of Bernardston, Colrain, Gill, Leyden, and Shelburne.

Alvord's accounts of his dealings with wholesale merchants show that while he occasionally dealt with local merchants, he obtained by far the bulk of his supplies from merchants in Hartford and New York City. Specifically, his dealing with Hartford and New York-based merchants accounted for fifty-two percent and forty-five percent, respectively, of the total value of the goods he purchased from non-local merchants between 1796 and late 1798 (3,371 pounds). Judging from the entries in his account book, Alvord's pattern of movement in purchasing goods from his suppliers was to travel to New York to conduct business in early winter (December and January) and late spring (May), then to stop over and conduct business with his Hartford-based suppliers on his return trip up the Connecticut River. In between the semi-annual trips to New York, he made numerous other visits to Hartford merchants and, on a few occasions, to merchants in Boston and Springfield, as well as in Suffield, Connecticut. In general terms, the items Alvord purchased from New York merchants consisted of manufactured goods, including textiles of a considerable variety, tools, furniture and craft hardware, dinnerware, cookware, blankets, and clothing.

Presumably the majority of these goods were of European origin. From his Hartford-based suppliers, Alvord purchased tropical and other imported produce such as rum, lump sugar, brown sugar, molasses, coffee, tea, spices, tobacco, and snuff.

Caleb Alvord Jr., too, appears to have relied heavily on Hartford-based merchants for his trade, but not at all on New York City merchants. His accounts of dealing with Connecticut River Valley merchants in 1809 and 1810 show that, except for a minimal number of small purchases from suppliers in Middletown, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield, Connecticut, he dealt almost exclusively with Hartford-based merchants. In fact, more than ninety percent of the $4,137 he paid out to Connecticut merchants between May of 1809 and September of 1810 was used to buy goods from Hartford merchants. The goods he purchased from his Hartford connections consisted mainly of tropical, primarily West Indian products. These included St. Croix and Antigua rum, sugar, molasses, and salt. Also included were goods such as New England rum, codfish, nails, and iron, which were evidently of domestic origin or imported from locations other than the West Indies. Alvord's strong ties to Hartford-based suppliers no doubt reflected the importance of his freighting business on the Connecticut River, but perhaps also reflected the impact of foreign trade restrictions during this period on ports like New York City, which were the major entry points for European imports.

According to his accounts, some of the local commodities which Alvord and his business partners managed for export included forest products such as lumber, tierces, barrels, and shingles. It is evident from the accounts of his transactions with local clients, however, that Alvord did not simply buy up forest products, but also actively engaged workers to cut, mill, and transport such products. His accounts from 1812 and 1813, along with evidence provided by vital statistics and federal census records, show that these workers came from the upland and backcountry areas east of the Connecticut River, in particular the towns of New Salem, Shutesbury, and Wendell.[19] Moreover, these

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19. The lumbering, milling, and transporting operations with which Alvord's workers were associated were most likely located in the upland areas east of the Connecticut River as well. During the early nineteenth century, these areas were the location of numerous lumber and milling operations.

men were not only his employees, but also his customers. In effect, it appears that Alvord purchased the surplus labor of these men on a credit and debit basis, used the products of their labor as a means to obtain imported trade goods, and then "sold" a portion of these goods back to them in lieu of their wages.

Taken together, the accounts of Caleb Alvord and Caleb Alvord Jr. reveal several important features about their merchant activities in the Greenfield area. First, through their mercantile operations, upland and lowland towns in the Greenfield area were tied together in a network of trade involving agricultural exports and imported European and West Indian goods. This network was centered in Greenfield and nearby Cheapside Landing. Second, this local network of merchant activity and commodity movement was tied to a regional economy organized around commercial centers in the lower Connecticut River Valley, Hartford in particular, and through these centers to still wider economic processes which encompassed major American ports, the West Indies, and Europe. Finally, the economic connections between upland and lowland towns in the Greenfield area, evident in the Alvords' accounts, and the connection of these to wider economic processes, involved not only the flow of commodities, but labor as well. As the accounts of Caleb Alvord Jr. suggest, the mobilization of labor in upland and back country areas may have been an important element in his local network of trade and in the articulation of this with regional and international economic processes.

The merchant activities of Sylvester Allen show a pattern of economic organization and interaction similar in many ways to that of the Alvords', but also reveal some important differences. A native of Providence, Rhode Island, in 1811 Sylvester Allen came to Greenfield from Brookfield, and set up in business as a tailor. By 1815, however, he was engaged in the mercantile trade, importing a variety of goods, such as broadcloth, flannel, calico, and other textiles, crockery, handkerchiefs, gloves, gilt vest buttons, tea trays, salt, sugar, molasses, coffee, tea, and spices.[20] In 1823, Allen expanded his mercantile operation by purchasing part interest in a store in Gill, and in 1827 entered into partnership with an associate under the name of "Allen and

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20. Franklin Herald, July 11 and December 5, 1815, and April 20, 1816.

Root."[21] By this time, Allen was one of the most wealthy and important men in Greenfield. In addition to his two stores and a sizeable stock in trade, he owned one of the most valuable personal estates in the town, was a major holder of local bank stocks, a stockholder in a local bridge company, an incorporator of a fire insurance company and the town's first bank, and a church leader.[22] Allen continued in the mercantile trade until 1846, when he turned over his business to his sons.

As was the case with both Alvords, Allen's enterprises were closely tied to the Connecticut River traffic and trade. During the 1820s and 1830s he owned and operated a wharf and warehouse at Cheapside Landing, and conducted the majority of his business there until he opened a store in the center of Greenfield in 1827. In addition, between 1835 and 1840, he and his business partner operated a barge-pulling steamboat on the Connecticut River between Cheapside and Hartford.[23] The importance of Allen's connections to the Connecticut River trade became evident during the 1830s and 1840s, when the first railroad schemes were being promoted in the area and he supported a north-south rail line between Greenfield and Northampton and, through it, to points south along the Connecticut River.[24]

The extant records of Allen's mercantile operations consist of his accounts of local credit and debit transactions in trade goods, agricultural products, and labor for the years from 1815 through 1823. These accounts record his trade with 322 different clients. Like Caleb Alvord's clients twenty years earlier, most of Allen's clients were concentrated in Greenfield and the adjacent towns to the west and north. Allen's trading network,

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21. Ralph M. Stoughton, History of the Town of Gill, Massachusetts, 1793-1843 (Greenfield, 1978), p. 154; Greenfield Gazette and Franklin Herald, December 18, 1827. The Gill store in which Allen acquired part interest was prior to this time managed by Alfred Alvord of Erving, the sometime business partner of Caleb Alvord Jr.

22. This assessment of Allen's real and personal estate is based on the Greenfield tax valuation lists for 1820 and 1830. The tax valuation lists are filed in Town of Greenfield Archives, Town Office, Greenfield.

23. Jenkins, Conservative Rebel, p. 62.

24. Ibid., p. 96.

however, was considerably more extensive, reaching farther into the upland areas to include the towns of Heath and Rowe, Massachusetts, as well as Guilford, Halifax, and Newfane, Vermont; to the south of Greenfield to include Conway, Hadley, and Northampton; and to the east of the Connecticut River to include Montague, New Salem, and Northfield, Massachusetts, as well as Winchester, New Hampshire.

One of the important features of Allen's mercantile operation was the types of goods in which he traded. The evidence from his account book indicates that, like the Alvords before him, he dealt in a wide range of imported goods, often in European manufactures and West Indian produce. In addition, however, he traded in a greater variety of consumer goods, including such items as crackers, prayer books, suspenders, silk handkerchiefs, needles, and pencils. Also, again like the Alvords, Allen accepted a wide range of agricultural products in exchange for his trade goods; however, in Allen's case these consisted not only of staple products such as beef, rye, and oats, but also more perishable goods such as apples, butter, cheese, and potatoes. Such products as these were most likely destined for domestic markets rather than for export.[25] Thus, Allen's stock in trade appears to reflect the transformation of the regional and national economy taking place during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century.

Allen, like Caleb Alvord Jr., also hired workers to produce and transport the goods he employed in his trade, and he often used similar methods. Here too, however, there were important differences. For example, in contrast to Alvord, who employed men in lumbering and milling operations, during the period from 1815 to 1823 Sylvester Allen employed a number of women in tailoring and weaving. Moreover, in some cases this work was not conducted simply through the putting-out system, but by boarding out-of-town women in local homes and putting them to work, presumably in his own shop. For example, in 1815 he credited $42.75 to the account of Pliny Russell of Greenfield, to board two of his workers, Phila Montague of Sunderland and Martha Clark of Leyden, for twenty and eight weeks, respectively.

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25. John R. Peet, "The Spatial Expansion of Commercial Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century: A Von Thunen Interpretation," Economic Geography 45 (1969): 283-301.

During the following two years, Clark was employed by Allen for a total of sixty-five weeks at an average of about $1.72 per week.

Though conclusions must be very tentative at this point, the types of production for which Allen organized labor and the *way* in which he organized labor and production are significant. Like the products and goods in which he traded, some of the types of production for which Allen hired labor suggest a reorientation of the merchant trade from foreign to domestic markets. In addition, in some cases Allen did not just purchase the labor of workers, but may also have recruited and moved the workers closer to the site of production. This production strategy would seem to lie mid-way between the earlier putting-out system and the factory system of production that developed in this area and elsewhere in New England in succeeding decades. Here again, Allen's account book records at ground level the changes taking place in the regional and national economies.

The shifts in the orientation of the merchant trade suggested by Allen's employment of female workers is also evident in his employment of male workers. Allen often hired local men to haul and cart his produce and goods. For the most part, this work appears to have centered around his Cheapside operations and was most likely related to his mercantile activities in the Connecticut River trade. Nevertheless, on a number of occasions, Allen's labor accounts show evidence of wages paid or credit given for transporting freight to and from Boston. Some of the goods brought from Boston were clearly of European origin and indicate the continuing importance of foreign trade.[26] In addition, however, the orientation towards Boston is quite different from the Alvords' operations of a decade earlier, and is at least suggestive of a reorientation of local and regional trade networks.

Finally, it is important to note that several of Allen's clients included other merchants in the towns of Bernardston, Colrain, and Gill. Some of these merchant-clients appear to have been smaller country merchants and storekeepers, who probably purchased some goods on a wholesale basis from Allen and then sold retail to their customers in the upland and backcountry areas. This, of course, mirrors the merchant trade hierarchy that was characteristic of the Connecticut River Valley in general. At the

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26. For example, see the Franklin Herald, July 11, 1815.

top of this hierarchy were the large-scale merchants in the major centers of import and export such as Boston and New York, next were the regional merchants at entrepots in the lower Connecticut River Valley such as Hartford and Middletown, Connecticut, then the merchants in lesser centers like Greenfield in the upper Connecticut River Valley, and, finally, the small traders in country stores in towns like Bernardston, Colrain, and Gill.

One example of the small-scale country merchant at the base of this hierarchy is Robert Williams, who traded in Charlemont during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century. Though Williams was a contemporary of Sylvester Allen, no evidence exists to link the two in trade. Williams, however, did have trading ties with other Greenfield merchants who operated on a scale and in commodities comparable to that of Sylvester Allen. The extant records of Williams' trade in Charlemont consist of several day books covering the period from May of 1817 to January of 1823. The first year of accounts in the day books recorded business Williams transacted while in partnership with another merchant-trader, and thereafter concern the trade he conducted on his own. Among other things, the day books provide insights into the nature, volume, and timing of Williams' trade.

To begin with, Williams traded in an extensive line of commodities, including eggs, butter, and a long list of other agricultural products, vegetable seeds, wool cards, chemicals for dying cloth, nails, wire, hand saws, tea kettles, gingham, muslin, flannel, burial shrouds, hymnals, school books, lead pencils, combs, rum, molasses, sugar, tea, hardware, dry goods, and imported goods. In effect, his business was similar in many respects to that of Sylvester Allen, only on a smaller scale. In addition, his business was more localized; his clients appear to have been mostly Charlemont residents.

In moving goods and produce in and out of this localized network of trade, Williams relied on both direct and indirect connections to the major market and supply centers in and outside the region. For example, his day books show that he transacted at least some business with the merchant firm of Kendall and Russell in Greenfield. At this time Kendall and Russell was one of the largest merchant firms in the Franklin County area and was heavily involved in the Connecticut River Valley trade. In fact, one of the partners, Lyman Kendall, was an agent of the J. and E.

Dwight merchant firm in Springfield.[27] Thus, it is likely that through dealings with merchant firms such as Kendall and Russell, Williams was tied into the Connecticut River trade and, through it, to even wider trade networks. In addition, Williams appears to have had some direct dealings with Boston-based merchants. For example, his accounts indicate that on several occasions he took the loan of a wagon and team for trips to Boston, presumably to conduct business there. On the basis of such accounts, however, it appears that unlike the operations of a larger-scale merchant like Sylvester Allen, such direct trade connections were not a major part of Williams' business.

Some of the most interesting aspects of Williams' trade are revealed by an analysis of the volume and timing of his trading activity. Such an analysis considers the number of transactions in goods and labor in which Williams engaged between 1817 and 1822. In June and July of 1817, for example, Williams recorded 677 and 688 such transactions, respectively, for a total of 1,365 transactions. After July, the number of transactions dropped off, but for the remainder of that year still averaged more than five hundred per month; the number of monthly transactions for subsequent years were lower than this figure, but still comparable. There exists little or no work on this dimension of small merchant trading activity, and so there is little basis for comparison. However, these numbers suggest that Williams operated a fairly active trade on a day-by-day, month-by-month basis over several years.

In addition, there was a seasonal pattern to Williams' trade. In general terms, the number of transactions in goods and labor in which he engaged reached its highest point during the summer months, leveled out and/or declined from September through December, then dropped-off dramatically until about May, when the number of transactions again began to increase. Although a more detailed analysis of these transactions is necessary, this seasonal pattern appears to reflect the influence of an agricultural cycle: increasing during the times of planting and harvesting in the late spring and summer months when the need and ability of Williams' farmer clients to purchase his goods would have been greatest, and decreasing as their need and ability to pay

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27. Jenkins, Conservative Rebel, p. 63.

declined during the late fall and winter months. It is interesting to note that this pattern tends to break down over time and that transactions were more evenly spread throughout the year in 1822 than in 1818. If the agricultural cycle was, in fact, one of the factors influencing the temporal pattern of Williams' trade, then this is precisely what would we would expect, since this time period was one in which the agricultural economy was beginning to give way to broader economic development.

A final interesting point is revealed by paying attention to the types of commodities in which Williams traded. The period of Williams' trade coincides with the development of sheep raising for wool as a major agricultural pursuit in upland towns like Charlemont. Generally speaking, the wool produced was processed locally and consumed in local or regional markets. As noted, among the commodities Williams moved into Charlemont and the surrounding area were wool cards and chemicals for dying cloth. In fact, these appear to have been important items in his trade. In effect, the important local economic development of sheep raising and wool production appears to have been linked to the functions performed by local merchants like Williams, and to the long distance trade connections which were vital to their mercantile activities.

The account and day books of Caleb Alvord, Caleb Alvord Jr., Sylvester Allen, and Robert Williams give ample evidence that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a wide network of commodity flows linked Greenfield to many of the towns of Franklin County and southern Vermont. Moreover, through the activities of these merchants and their trade connections, this network of commodity flows was tied to the major centers of trade in the Connecticut River Valley and the northeast and, through them, linked to the Atlantic and European economies. For the most part, the commodities moving through this network and the long distance trade connections consisted of locally produced agricultural and forest products for export, and imported domestic, European, and West Indian goods for local consumption. It is important to point out that labor mobilized by the merchants was an important component in the movement of commodities in and out of the area and in the actual production of surpluses destined for local, regional, national, and international markets.

Of course, the merchants whose activities are examined here represent only a small number of all the merchants who conducted trade in the Greenfield area, and an even smaller number of those operating in the entire Connecticut River Valley during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But, in fact, that may be the most important point of all. There is nothing especially unique about the Alvords, Sylvester Allen, or Robert Williams, except, perhaps, that their account and day books have survived. If we multiply the network of trade connections and commodity flows evident in their activities by the many large and small scale merchants we know to have operated in the Greenfield area and in the Connecticut River Valley during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, what emerges is a dense, complicated network of economic interaction between valley and hill towns, and an equally dense and complicated set of interconnections articulating this network with wider regional, national, and international economic processes.

Finally, this analysis of merchants' account and day books has implications for our understanding of the nature and development of the early American economy and society. The image of independent farm households -- each possessing all it required in terms of land, labor, and other resources, and each producing all it consumed and consuming all it produced -- persists, despite much evidence to the contrary.[28] The logical extension of this image is a society in which communities and towns are isolated from one another and in which regional and larger-scale economic, social, and political processes do not and cannot exist.

This image of self-sufficiency and isolation is deeply-rooted when one considers the hill town regions and back country areas of New England, such as those which surrounded the towns of the Connecticut River Valley during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We often imagine these areas to be far from the centers of commerce and culture, out of touch with the flow

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28. Percy Bidwell, "Rural Economy in New England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century," Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences (1916), and "The Agricultural Revolution in New England," American Historical Review 26 (1921): 683-707; Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," Radical History Review, Winter, 1977, pp. 47-71.

of events, and beyond the reach of large-scale economic, social, political, and ideological processes. The evidence contained in the merchants' account and day books suggest that this view is untenable. The kinds of local and long distance trade networks in evidence in the Greenfield area during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are in direct contradiction to the image of an economy based on subsistence production and self-sufficiency, and rooted in isolation. To the contrary, the evidence indicates that this image should be cast aside in favor of one which admits to more complex local, regional, national, and international interactions.