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DAILY LIFE UNDER DURESS: RICHARD VAUX, A
PHILADELPHIA TEXTILE MERCHANT AND HIS BUSINESS,
1777-1790

Marisa A. Morra

Richard Vaux was a Philadelphia merchant who sold textiles during and immediately after the Revolution. His story may be told as the biography of a Quaker merchant and businessman. But his story has more to offer. It may, more importantly, shed light on the merchant profession itself, for it is possible to show how this man's personal life influenced the goods he distributed to the American market.

The Revolutionary period, when Vaux reached the peak of his business activity, has traditionally been considered a "transitional" period, and has not been the focus of much recent material culture scholarship. This period, between 1777 and 1790, had unusual constraints and characteristics that need to be isolated, particularly for how they affected businessmen like Richard Vaux.

The war interrupted normal trade patterns. Many merchants were put out of business, while for others this period worked greatly to their advantage. Laws against the importation of some goods made demands on how a merchant could select and distribute his goods, and had implications for their use. Privateers and warships made travel more dangerous, although not impossible. Adventurous businessmen benefited from working the new circumstances to their advantage, and everyone had to adapt in order to continue trading during this time of upheaval.

The business and life-events of Richard Vaux shed light on the changes that took place during this period, and how one person adapted to them. They lead to a greater understanding of individual merchant decisions and ultimately to the factors behind the distribution of goods, in this case textiles, in America from 1777 to 1790.


Although not everyone worked under the same constraints, the choices Vaux made in mercantile ventures may serve as an example of the entrepreneurial flexibility merchants demonstrated to keep their businesses active and profitable. Vaux's case reflects the change in motivation behind selection of goods.

As you will see, Vaux's career permits a close linkage to be drawn between business practices, kinship, and American material culture.

In 1772, at the age of 21, Richard Vaux finished his apprenticeship with Philadelphia dry goods merchant Samuel Sansom. If he had been a bolder young man, he might have immediately started his own business. But Vaux, the youngest son of a prominent doctor, was a Quaker who had recently emigrated from London, and he was cautious. He became a supercargo for another merchant and spent many hours at sea running the trade between the West Indies and Philadelphia for James Pemberton.¹

With this additional experience he could naturally have become a principal in an important Philadelphia-based firm, but in 1775 that clearly would not have been a wise decision. Although many merchants and adventurers went on to make a fortune during the Revolution, Vaux was caught in a dilemma. As a Quaker he was compelled to be a pacifist, but his natural political inclination was not to break from England, where his family, friends, and business were.

One Philadelphia evening, late in 1776, Vaux's passions were stirred enough to join a crowd of Tories singing "God Save the King" in a public square. This landed him promptly in jail. Calmed after three months there, he quietly fled to London, determined to conduct business and wash his hands of politics.

Because he had not conducted trade for his own firm, Vaux had no established distributors or customers when he arrived in London. What choices was he forced to make because he started his business at this moment in time?

Goods— like the textiles Vaux traded— which would normally have been unrestricted to newly established merchants, were not scarce but had become difficult to acquire. It became a formidable task for new merchants to work with export firms, and factors of trust and monetary backing became central for smaller merchants who did not have means or might.

As a Quaker, Vaux did not join those who participated in innovative or risky methods of making money. Because he was forced to flee from Philadelphia, he had to rely on the kinship bonds of his London family and friends in order to participate in commerce. So for Vaux, these extenuating circumstances meant drawing on a small circle of relatives and trusted friends for the majority of his transactions. His choice of goods, therefore, was prescribed by the specialization of his relations' businesses and contacts. This affected the kind of goods he distributed, which in turn influenced American taste and consumption during the Revolutionary period.

Besides serving as merchants and dry goods distributors in London, several Quaker families had settled into the calico printing business around London. One of these Quaker calico printers became Vaux's key source for the textiles he distributed.

Richard Vaux became business partners with Ambrose Lloyd, a member of the Quaker Lloyd family who started Lloyd's Bank. Vaux was not directly related to Lloyd, but they attended the same Quaker meeting in London, and Vaux's family had served as doctors to the Lloyds for three generations. Ambrose, another youngest son, was a principal in the London dry goods firm Talwin, Lloyd & Co., and ran a calico printing business on the grounds of his estate near Bow, called Bromley Hall. This name may ring a familiar bell, for Bromley Hall was the largest calico printworks in East London in the mid to late eighteenth century.

Vaux was shrewd in his choice of partners, for the Bromley Hall printworks were strategically set up for export. Located on the banks of the river Lea, near the East India warehouses, they could avoid the crowded London docks, and by-pass the short but treacherous trip around the Isle of Dogs. They could also easily supply London, by means of the Limehouse cut, made in 1770, to aid in transporting goods and produce from the East.

Vaux entered his daily trips to Bromley Hall in his diaries, often going back and forth between the East India

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4 For more on traditional Quaker business methods see Frederick Tolles, Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682-1763 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1948). Although much of Tolles work is now dated, it still serves as a good overview of Quaker business practices.

5References to Vaux and his relationship to Ambrose Lloyd and Bromley hall are scattered throughout Vaux's memorandum books. See Box 14, misc. Vaux Papers, HSP.
Docks and the calico printworks with textiles for comparison or approval by Lloyd.

From 1777 to 1783 Vaux loaded ships full of textiles and flour and set off to St. Eustatius and later St. Thomas, both neutral ports in the West Indies, to distribute his wares. Philadelphia merchants and merchants from other states, informed of his arrival, traveled to the islands to choose or pick up their goods.

Vaux became well known for his printed textiles, and merchants placed large orders, some as large as £27,000 at a time. Vaux meticulously recorded these purchases, but instead of using numbers for specific textile designs, the standard practice, he wrote out the entire name and description of his wares, which allows us to identify exactly what he sold.

Bromley Hall specialized in copper-plate printed textiles, and Vaux quickly became their largest distributor to Philadelphia and Baltimore. Copper-plate printed textiles had been popular in the Anglo-American world since the 1760s. They came in a wide variety of designs. The majority of these were small scale all-over florals, used for dresses, petticoats, and other items of apparel. Copper-plate prints were also used for bed hangings.

Of the 180 designs in the Bromley Hall pattern book, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, about 155 were of this type, small florals identified by numbers. The other 25 were large scale scenic designs with sophisticated and naturalistic patterns. These had evocative names like 'Castle,' or 'Shepherd and Shepherdess.' They comprise the majority of copper-plate prints surviving in American textile collections today. Were they saved because of their spectacular designs, the smaller patterns being cast aside? Vaux's order books prove this conjecture to be untrue: the large quantities ordered establish that these designs were clearly preferred.

Vaux sold large scale scenic designs almost exclusively. American taste for dense designs was reiterated in the 1774-87 account books of Wister and Miles, another Philadelphia firm, who indicated to their English factors that textiles should be, "very full of work, not to have too much white, and with large figures."

Fine cotton copperplate printed furnitures appeared in order after order. Vaux noted to a friend, "My Cargo is large and I have the satisfaction of arriving to a good

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6 For example see Isaac de Leon order November 14, 1782, Vaux Order Book, Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, Winterthur Library.

7 Noted in order to Harrison & Ansley, May 3, 1774, Account Book of Wister and Miles, Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, Winterthur Library.
market, which you know is the very thing to a merchant."

The Vaux account books from 1782–83 show that whimsical rococo designs were purchased at the same time and in the same quantity as newer, classical designs. The most frequently ordered designs were Chinese People, Pheasant, Tyger, and Diana. These last two designs can now be firmly dated to coincide with the account books, which are eight years earlier than previously published dates for these designs. Contemporary botanical prints found their way into copperplate designs, and were equally profitable in their American distribution.

These fabrics were ordered in 28-yard length pieces in red, blue, pompadour (a reddish pink), and purple. Purple was the most fashionable color, and Vaux chose it to bring home to his fianceé in 1784 when he was finally able to safely return to Philadelphia. He brought 84 yards, at 2 shillings 6 pence a yard, enough for bed hangings, window hangings, and possibly loose covers for chairs. These bed hangings appeared in his 1790 inventory.

Copper-plate printed textiles were not as expensive as chintz or calicoes, because they generally used only one color, which also accounts for the much larger quantities ordered. One way to add color, and therefore expense, was to block print or hand paint colors onto the textile after copperplate printing. Vaux ordered copperplate printed textiles which he called "plate chintz furniture," almost certainly indicating the use of this technique. This is also reflected in their price, as they were twice as expensive as the other designs. This method is known to have been used by Robert Jones of Old Ford, the calico printer nearest Bromley Hall, but Vaux's accounts show this technique must have been utilized at Bromley Hall as well, even though, to my knowledge, there are no documented Bromley Hall textiles of this kind.

Vaux also carried a surprisingly varied number of clothing articles. Sailors' jackets would be a necessary commodity in the large trading ports where Vaux set up his businesses. Breeches, cotton or linen check shirts, oznabrig frocks, and trousers were distributed to the island natives, including slaves, free blacks, and planters, and to slaves and working people in America. Vaux specifically refers to one order of breeches and waistcoats sent to Philadelphia as slops, a very early usage of that word.

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8Richard Vaux to Dr. Thomas Parke, September 24, 1779, Pemberton Papers, Parrish Collection, HSP.
For women he carried caps of different sorts, and callimanco shoes, both "french heeled" and "common heeled," the latter in the larger quantities.

In late 1782 and 1783 Vaux sent these textiles and goods to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Fredericksburg, Virginia. These were crucial years to make a profit. They came after the last battle of the war, but before the Treaty of Paris, and goods could still be sent to the States at their high war-time prices.

Vaux concluded his business on St. Thomas late in 1783 and returned to Philadelphia in 1784. He lived, at first, above his store on Water Street. This small store did not compare with the urban stores in England. Nor did Vaux's business strategies compare with the selling and marketing techniques which were starting to be used in London, such as light and attractive shop windows, and areas for customers to rest, encouraging them to stay longer. Vaux's store in the commercial district of Philadelphia had a single 15 over 15 pane window facing east, and a single stool inside, which the apprentice probably occupied. In less than 20 years the face of British and American cities would grow much more similar, but during the 1780s, this was not yet the case.

The economic climate in Philadelphia and elsewhere after the war was—in a word—bleak. There was a post-war depression, a shortage of hard currency, inflated credit rates, and a glut of goods in the market that everyone lamented. Advertisements in local newspapers flaunted the quantity and variety of textiles available in Philadelphia: luxury items such as French and Italian gauze, brocaded silks, gold and silver tissue, even Genoa velvet. Could these sell in a country with very little hard-money? Apparently, Vaux didn't think so. In that climate, staple goods were the more reliable investment.

Letters to England show that Vaux kept his stock consistent in his first few years back in Philadelphia. He continued to order printed cottons of all sorts, including many with dark backgrounds. Many textile historians associate these dark ground designs with the 1790s, but they were imported in large quantities in the 1780s as well. Vaux kept in his stock some of the specialized goods he had carried during the war. For example, pre-embroidered fabrics, both colored and white,
were ordered with some frequency, though not in large quantities.

Vaux's stock of woolen goods began to increase steadily from year to year. These were not all plain, but included stripes, plaids, small geometric, and 'clouded' patterns, which were popular in wool as well as cotton fabrics.

Eventually Vaux moved away from carrying any fancy goods at all, and carried mostly white linen for sheeting and underclothes, simple striped linens, and striped and plain woools. These staple goods took less effort and energy to sell, and this allowed him to devote more time to other adventures with a higher yield.

By 1790 he had clearly diversified. His dry goods store now made up a small percentage of his commercial activity, about 13% of his net worth. He traded goods for tobacco in Virginia, participated in the Canton trade recently set up in Philadelphia, and expanded his European adventures to include France and Holland.10 Ambrose Lloyd had died in 1787, and Vaux had ordered from Talwin, Lloyd & Co. in increasingly smaller amounts. Vaux was able to push through the hard years right after the war and accrued enough money to move into a large house on Arch Street, away from the commotion of the docks on Water Street.

Vaux was struck in October 1790 with a disease that left him blind. He died November 5 of the same year at age 39. At his untimely death, Vaux was on the edge of a transitional period of his life, as well as a pivotal and transitional period in American merchandising history. Free trade was still new for America, and product abundance meant lower prices and greater availability for the consumer than ever before. The 1790s were boom years, and Vaux had newly begun to adjust his business to accommodate them.

Vaux was a middle-level merchant by 1790. He was not a 'merchant prince' like Stephen Girard or Robert Morris, nor was he poor.11 He was well placed socially, and lived comfortably. In this, his choices and accomplishments may be representative of a large group of merchants, not only in Philadelphia, but in many growing cities in early Federal America.

Vaux's business reflects the change in motivation behind selection of goods. He moved from working in a

10 All references to unfinished business ventures are from Inventory (see note 9), and net worth was calculated from total assets listed in inventory.
11 For discussion of these large merchant firms see Doerflinger, 130-2.
period of constraints, to one that was relatively free from them. Vaux's choices can be put into a larger arena than just personal preference. This permits an interpretation of causal relationships between war-time business constraints, kinship, and goods.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


