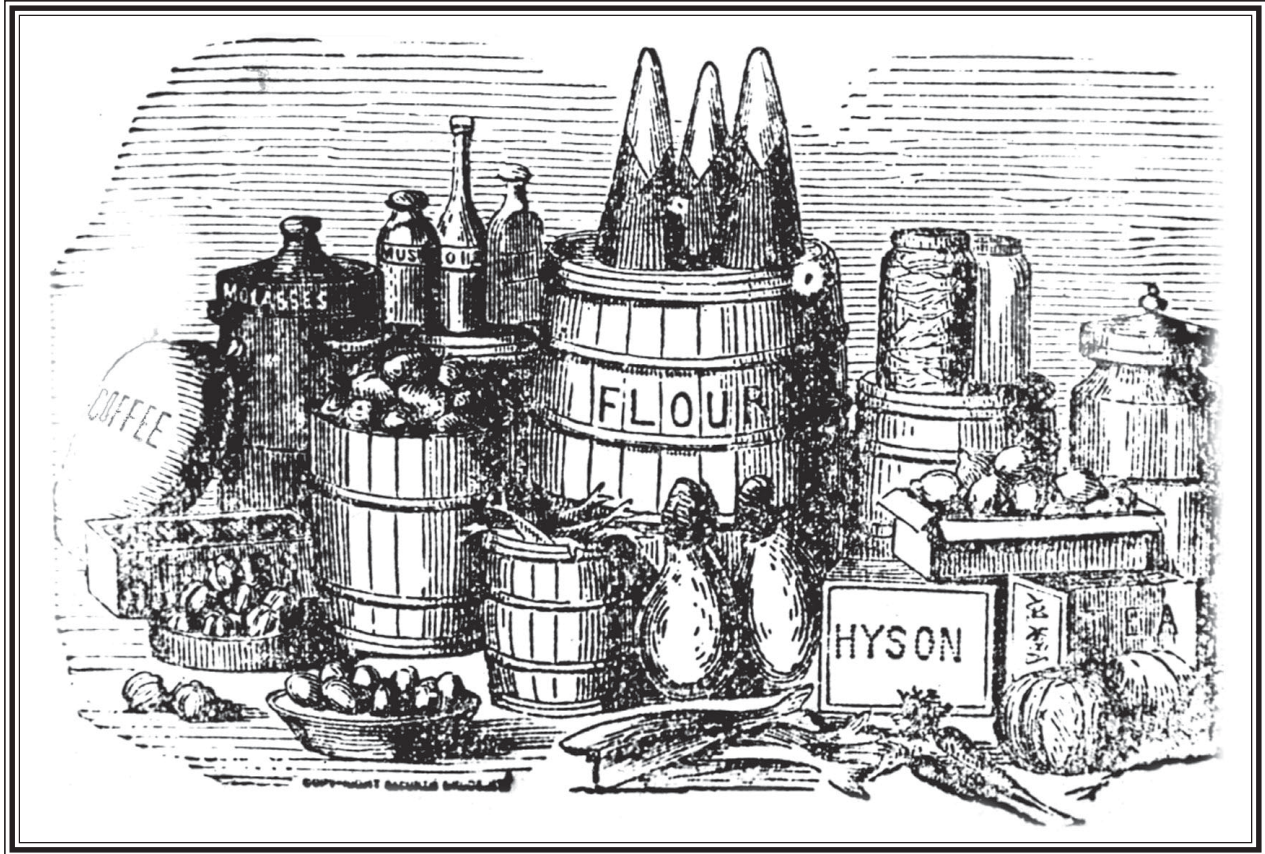




## West India Goods Store



### Retail Shops in the Golden Age of Sail

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exotic goods like coffee, tea, and spices were brought into Salem by adventurous sea captains and sold to the residents of the city in dozens of West India Goods Stores.

### Salem and International Trade

Salem was a vital part of British colonial trade as early as the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Dried cod and timber were taken from Salem to British plantations in the West Indies, and molasses, sugar and rum were then traded for fine and exotic goods in England.

After the Revolutionary War, merchant ships from Salem reached nearly every port in the world. Almost fifty wharves lined Salem Harbor, each covered with warehouses filled with exotic and valuable cargoes. Dozens of ships would unload cargo every month from Asia, Europe, South America, Africa, and North America. These goods, such as coffee, tea, molasses, silk, cotton, spices, porcelain, and even furniture, would be shipped from Salem to markets inland, further south, or to other countries, but a portion of the incoming cargo would also be sold to the city's residents.

The very nature of Salem shipping contributed to the mixture of goods found in almost all the stores in the city. Salem ships sailed from port to port around the world, exchanging goods in each port. Ideally, a ship would leave with a cargo of goods that were common in America, and return a couple of years later having "traded up" for goods that were expensive in this country. As a result, the selection of items available in a shop on any given day was determined to some extent by the cargo of the latest ship that had arrived in port.

Because of its international trade, Salem was also a trading center for New England. Farmers and craftsmen sent their products to Salem to trade for imported goods. These local products were sold in the West India Goods Stores to the citizens of Salem and exported all over the world.

### Retail Shops in Salem

The West India Goods Stores that were so numerous in Salem during the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries were, as the name suggests, commercial establishments that sold items imported from the Caribbean Islands (or West Indies as the area was then known). These goods were primarily molasses, sugar, coffee, cocoa, indigo and cotton, with smaller quantities of wine, rum, salt, and hides.

In almost every instance, stores that advertised West India Goods also advertised groceries and were known as "West India Goods and Groceries" stores. This was done frequently enough to suggest that the term "West India Goods Store" was a generic one referring to what was essentially a general store. In their advertisements, store owners offered goods as diverse as Russian canvas, Chinese porcelain, cotton

cloth from India, and pepper from Sumatra—one of the most expensive and sought-after spices in the Western world. Nutmegs, cloves, and even oranges were among the items sold in Salem.

Above: a woodcut of various exotic goods available in Salem. From the 1861 Salem City Directory. NPS collections.

Right: the West India Goods Store at Salem Maritime today. NPS photo.



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## The West India Goods Store at Salem Maritime National Historic Site

The West India Goods Store at Salem Maritime National Historic Site was built by Captain Henry Prince about 1800. Prince's store was probably first used as a warehouse to store cargo until it could be sold to the general public or to other merchants for export on ships leaving Salem.

By 1836, Charles Dexter had a shop in this building. It was one of many that served the needs of Salem households by selling candles, oils, clothing, tin,

and glassware. Besides general groceries such as grain, cheese, dried beans and even rum, many foreign imports and luxuries from Europe, Asia, and Africa filled the shelves of the West India Goods Store.

The store continued to be a retail space throughout the nineteenth century. Later occupants included painters, a tobacconist, and a wine and liquor merchant.

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## Captain Henry Prince



Above: Pastel miniature of Captain Henry Prince. Artist and date unknown. Image courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

Capt. Henry Prince, Sr. was born in Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1764. At the age of 14, he came to Salem as an apprentice to Joshua Phippen, a cooper in the town. It appears that he was 21 when he first went to sea (an advanced age to begin a career at sea in the eighteenth century), but he quickly rose in the ranks to become a captain. By the early 1790s, Prince was commanding vessels for the most important merchants in Salem, including Elias Hasket Derby, Jerathmiel Peirce, and Aaron Waite, and regularly sailing to the East Indies. In 1795, he was the captain of the ship *Henry* for Elias Hasket Derby, and his second mate was the brilliant mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch, who was soon to be known for the publication of the famous navigational manual *The New American Practical Navigator*. Bowditch sailed with Prince several times during his career at sea.

While he was still sailing all over the world, Prince was also becoming a merchant by investing in voyages and purchasing vessels in partnership with other small merchants in Salem. By 1796, he had made enough money to purchase the "little brick house" on Derby Street from Elias Hasket Derby. He married Sarah Millet in 1785, and they had nine children, seven of whom lived to adulthood. The Prince family lived in the Derby House until 1827.

Around 1800, Prince built the warehouse now known as the West India Goods Store right next to his house and quickly filled it with exotic imports. His vessels sailed all over the world and brought back pepper, coffee, turtle shells, water buffalo hides, sugar, and other luxury goods to the small building on Derby Street.

Like many merchants in Salem, Captain Prince found it difficult to weather the economic storms of the early nineteenth century. President Jefferson's Embargo of 1807 halted all international trade to and from this country, and badly hurt the American economy. After the embargo, Salem's trade gradually moved south to Boston and New York, and smaller merchants often found themselves in desperate financial straits. In 1827, Captain Prince and his son, Henry Jr. were foreclosed on by one of the banks in Salem, and the Derby House and warehouse had to be sold. However, Capt. Prince was able to get a job as a customs inspector in the Salem Custom House, where he worked until he was relieved of his duties in May 1846 because of his advanced age and failing health by the new Surveyor of Customs in Salem, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Captain Henry Prince died on October 1, 1846. He is buried in the Howard Street Cemetery in Salem.

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## The West India Goods Store Today

The West India Goods Store at Salem Maritime National Historic Site is one of the last early shops to be found in New England. Today, Eastern National, a non-profit partner of the National Park Service, operates a luxury trade shop in this West India Goods Store as part of Salem Maritime National Historic Site. To represent Salem's early trade period, Eastern National sells spices, coffee, teas,

porcelain, and many other items from China, India, Africa, Indonesia, and other foreign ports that are similar to the items available to the citizens of Salem in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The profits from any purchases you make at this store are used to support the interpretive programs of the National Park Service at Salem Maritime National Historic Site.

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## For Further Reading

### Further Reading for Adults:

Hawes, Dorothy Schurman. *To the Farthest Gulf: the Story of the American China Trade*. Ipswich, MA: Ipswich Press, 1990.

Keay, John *The Spice Route*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Kurlansky, Mark. *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998

Kurlansky, Mark. *Salt: A World History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

Moxham, Roy. *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire*. New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004.

National Park Service. *Salem: Maritime Salem in the Age of Sail*. Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 2001.

### Further Reading for Children:

"Salem and the East Indies Trade" *Cobblestone*, Vol. 9 (Sep 1988).

"When Spice Ruled." *Calliope*, Vol. 16 (Feb 2006).

Hall, Donald. *Ox-Cart Man*. New York: Puffin Books, 1983.

Latham, Jean Lee. *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

### For Seasonal Hours, Please Contact:

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West India Goods Store  
164 Derby Street  
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### On The World Wide Web:

Salem Maritime National Historic Site  
<http://www.nps.gov/sama>

Eastern National  
<http://www.eparks.com>