

Bruce C. Daniels, "The Colonial Background of New England's Secondary Urban Centers (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island)" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 14, No 1 (January 1986).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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The Colonial Background of New England's Secondary Urban Centers

Bruce C. Daniels

Throughout New England's history, Boston has been (and still is) the region's only primary urban center. From its early position as the center of Puritan civilization and Revolutionary resistance to its twentieth-century identification with cultural and intellectual excellence, Boston has enjoyed an extraordinary influence on the national consciousness. Nor does this influence stop at the American border: in the Canadian maritime provinces, people often refer to New England as "The Boston states;" and "banned in Boston" is a phrase, for better or worse, familiar to the literati throughout much of the world. Boston's pre-eminence and high visibility, however, have obscured the role of other important New England cities and diminished the ease with which people outside of New England can identify these secondary centers and locate them in a geographical, political, cultural, and economic setting. This, of course, upon reflection, is not surprising and the same phenomenon is apparent in many other regions and countries. Buffalo would certainly have an enhanced visibility if it were located on the northern great plains where it would dwarf its nearest rivals instead of being located in the same state as New York City.

Although Boston's position as New England's urban center has remained constant, there has been a substantial ebb and flow in importance among the secondary cities in each of the four states that had once been colonies. New London, colonial Connecticut's busiest port, and Norwich, its second-most populous town, are relatively small cities today. Newport, the only eighteenth-century New England town that could be conceived of as a rival to Boston, has metamorphosed from a major economic entrepôt to a resort center associated with yachting, beautiful beaches, mansions, and jazz. Similarly, time has passed by Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Salem, Massachusetts, the two main sea-ports north of Boston in the colonial period. In nineteenth-century Massachusetts, Lowell and Lynn emerged as major industrial centers, and New Bedford and Fall River dominated fishing and whaling as the ubiquity of their names in sea chanties and folk culture testifies.

In the twentieth century, seven cities can be identified as constituting a strata of urbanization located between Boston and the lesser cities of the region: Springfield and Worcester, Massachusetts; Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; and Manchester, New Hampshire. One could argue that Manchester is not found in this strata—its population has

always been substantially less than the other six—but, despite its lagging behind the others in numbers, Manchester is the most important city in northern New England and the “Queen City” of a sub-region, the Merrimack Valley. It is unrivalled in New Hampshire as Providence is unrivalled in Rhode Island. Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven have rotated the lead as Connecticut’s most populous city throughout the twentieth century and each at various times could (and did) lay claim to being the state’s most important city. Although Hartford, as the capital of the state and the self-proclaimed capital of the insurance industry, and New Haven, as the home of Yale University and once the capital of a colony with the same name, are much more well-known to people outside the state, Bridgeport has aggressively asserted its place as an equal partner in Connecticut’s urban establishment: in the 1980 census it was the largest of the three. Worcester has been Massachusetts’ second-largest city since 1870 and Springfield has been the state’s third-largest since 1920 when it moved ahead of Cambridge, Fall River, Lynn, and New Bedford.

All of these seven cities have been in decline since 1950, if one measures the health of a city by its population. Six of them have fewer people today than at mid-century and Manchester, which has had a slight increase in numbers, has declined in relative importance from being the 134th-largest city in the United States in 1950 to being the 199th-largest in 1980. The decline in numbers, however, is not due to any reordering of urban rank in New England: the growth of suburbs and the general population flow to the west in the 1950s and 1960s and to the sunbelt in the 1970s have caused almost all of the major cities in the north-east and upper midwest to decline slightly in population. More to the point, all of the seven cities are still the centers of large, growing metropolitan areas which they continue to dominate. Urban sprawl has greatly reduced the value of raw population data in assessing urban importance. Hartford contained only 30,000 more people in 1980 than one of its suburbs, New Britain: yet, a casual drive through the centers of each would convince anyone that the two cities varied tremendously in development and importance. Data could easily be cited on a number of measurements to reinforce this—types of business, value of retail sales, numbers of hospitals, museums, colleges, and so forth—but they would only serve to prove the obvious.

Thus, these seven cities represent the long-range success stories of New England’s urban history: of nearly one thousand towns founded in the colonial period, they (along with Boston, of course) were the ones to grow and become major entrepôts in the twentieth century while others grew relatively less, grew and declined, or did not grow at all. As in the case of all success stories—whether of individuals, businesses, or cities—it is intriguing to try to identify the factors that produced the winners and implicitly the factors that doomed others to the status of honorable mention, also-rans, or never-weres. This essay attempts to do so by examining the growth of these seven cities from their inception to the first federal census in 1790. It asks two basic questions. Could the future success of the cities have been reasonably predicted in 1790? Does the colonial experience of the cities explain why they succeeded?

Little in its early background would have suggested that Worcester would grow to become Massachusetts’ and New England’s second-largest city today.

Situated on the Blackstone River, which was not navigable, Worcester could not take any direct part in oceangoing commerce and it further suffered from a shortage of good meadowland. It was, in the General Court's words, "well watered with ponds and brooks" but its greatest physical advantage was not its intrinsic qualities but its location relative to other centers. Located approximately forty miles from Providence and Boston, fifty miles from Springfield, and sixty miles from Hartford, Worcester was far enough away from each of these that it did not have to worry about rivals whose own success would destroy its commerce. On the other hand, Worcester was close enough to these centers to take advantage of trade opportunities with them, and the "country road to Connecticut," as the main highway from the coast to the interior was called, passed through it. It is only with hindsight, however, that we can see the advantage Worcester had in essentially being able to fill an urban vacuum: colonial Worcester did not develop economically in any way that would distinguish it from any of several dozen country towns in the backcountry of Massachusetts.¹

Indeed, Worcester's early history offered a lesson in failure. First settled in 1675, over a decade after the General Court had authorized the creation of a town, Worcester was deserted during King Philip's War. Resettled primarily by new residents in 1684, Worcester was again abandoned and the town destroyed in 1702—a victim of war for the second time. The "third planting" in 1713 proved to be permanent and Worcester was incorporated as a town in 1722. Its location on the frontier exposed it to potential devastation for the third time in 1724 and 1725 but the threatened attacks did not materialize.² Security from Indian raids guaranteed Worcester's survival as a farming town but not as a market town of undue consequence. Any distinction Worcester enjoyed in the colonial period was derived from its designation in 1731 as the shire town of Worcester County. Four other towns in the county, Sutton, Lancaster, Mendon, and Brookfield were more populous and had higher tax valuations, indicating more economic development; Worcester, however, was centrally located in the county, an advantage that allowed the other rivals to accept it as a compromise choice. Being a county seat conveyed many benefits. Probate court sessions were held regularly throughout the year, one sitting of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts was held annually in October, and the Inferior Court held General Sessions of the Peace in February, May, August, and November. Court days attracted many visitors and participants and occasioned much business along with a variety of frivolities such as horseracing, wrestling contests, and, of course, parties. While some of these activities may have been a mixed blessing in the eyes of local residents, they brought money and men of power and substance to town. Worcester's leaders were well aware of this tangible boost to the local economy and of the intangible boost in esteem. Several times they successfully fought the attempts of neighboring towns to have the shire duties split among three or four towns.³

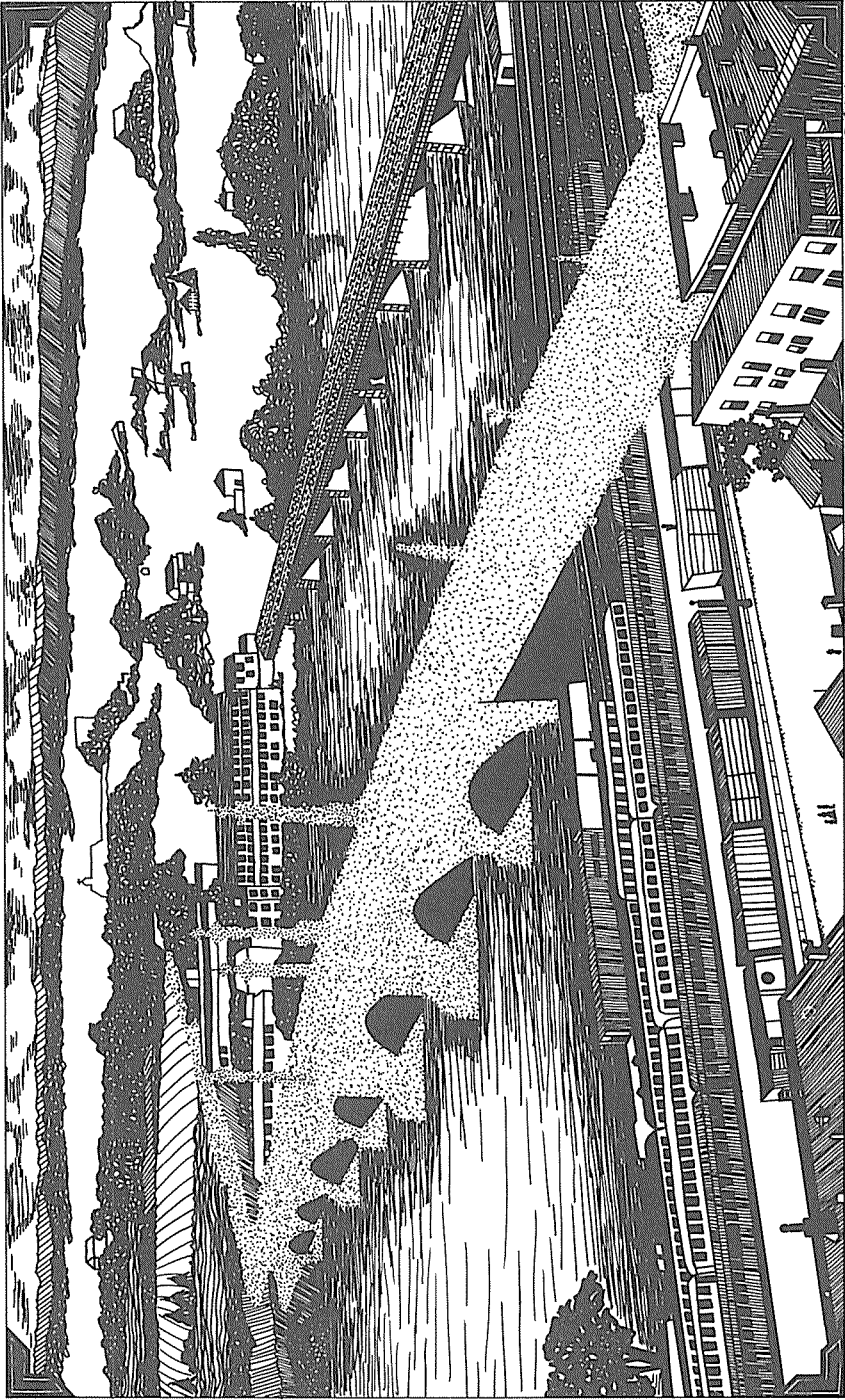
Despite the advantage of being a county seat, Worcester's development did not excite anyone's imagination in the colonial period: at the first federal census of 1790 it still was a rather average community sustained primarily by farming. It had but three church societies, five physicians, and three lawyers. In 1769 the General Court had ordered Worcester to start a grammar school but not until the mid-1780s did the town reluctantly comply. With a population of 2,095,

Worcester was the third-largest town in the county and the 34th-largest in the state. It had a number of shops and artisans but nothing out of proportion to its small population; certainly no one thought of incorporating it as a city. The minutes for the eleven town meetings held in 1790 reveal virtually nothing in the way of commercial concerns and show a typical farming town convening to discuss roads, taxes, schools, and other sundries. The elected officers served traditional village and rural needs.⁴

Springfield, Massachusetts' third-largest city, had a much more auspicious beginning: almost from its inception in 1636 it exhibited urban characteristics that distinguished it from other agricultural villages settled west of the coast. Founded in 1636 by a company of men led by William Pynchon, a former treasurer of the Massachusetts Bay Company, Springfield was situated on the Connecticut River approximately ninety miles west of Boston and twenty miles north of the three river towns, Hartford, Windsor, and Wethersfield. Pynchon held a magistrate's commission in both Massachusetts and the newly-founded colony of Connecticut: for six years Springfield functioned ambiguously as part of Connecticut while not forswearing its ties to Massachusetts. In 1642, however, after four years of squabbling with the river towns and eventually being censured by them for what they perceived as heavy-handed dealings with local Indians, Pynchon severed ties with Connecticut and placed Springfield under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts. Not surprisingly, Connecticut protested against this but was unable to prevent it.⁵

To say that Pynchon "led" Springfield is in most ways a serious understatement—he dominated it, arranging its settlement, controlling to a remarkable degree its government, financing the vast majority of its early settlers and enterprises, and representing it to the world beyond the upper Connecticut River Valley. Pynchon's vision for Springfield focussed neither on establishing a godly community of Puritan saints nor an agricultural village. Some farmers were needed and piety was never discouraged, but Pynchon envisaged Springfield primarily as the major trading center of the west: a center that would collect furs from the Indians and produce from the countryside and exchange them with the outside world for commodities and cash. Secondly, Springfield was to provide artisanal services to a hinterland of farmers and produce crafts and forestry products for export. Thus, commercialism and economic diversification characterized Springfield from the start. Men came to seek their fortunes as fur traders, craftsmen, teamsters, laborers, and farmers: over two-thirds of the first generation of settlers had marketable skills they practiced in addition to farming. Gristmills, sawmills, lead mines, turpentine manufactories, ironworks, and essential local crafts were all in operation within a decade of the town's founding. Even the agriculture was more commercial at an earlier date than in most other towns; meatpacking, for example, grew rapidly. The fur trade thrived briefly and contributed much to Springfield's wealth before declining badly by the 1650s with the exhaustion of the supply of pelts.⁶

Under the patronage of Pynchon and his son John who succeeded his father in 1652, Springfield dominated the upper Connecticut River Valley in the seventeenth century. The two Pynchons helped organize and finance eight other towns in the area that comprised a hinterland. In the seventeenth century,



P. Mullica, 1925

Old Toll Bridge of 1816, with outline of future Memorial Bridge (built in 1922)—Springfield, Massachusetts. Viewed from the Springfield side.

Springfield combined the qualities of an urban entrepôt, company town, and extended medieval manor. Exchanging goods and providing services for most of the people in the area, its economy depended almost completely on the Pynchons, as did its government and courts. Stephen Innes, colonial Springfield's leading historian, describes Springfield's characteristics with the words "developmentalism, diversification, acquisitiveness, individualism, contentiousness, and stratification." These terms obviously bespeak urban characteristics and seventeenth-century Springfield's "boosters"—to use a word Daniel Boorstin applies to nineteenth-century urban patrons—the Pynchons, created an important commercial center that gave every sign of being destined for even greater success.⁷

That destiny, however, was not realized in the eighteenth century. During the upheaval that accompanied the overthrow of the Dominion of New England in the early 1690s, the Pynchons lost much of their political and economic power and Springfield lost the energies of its patrons that had been so instrumental to its early success. Other towns, particularly Northampton, located twenty miles north on the Connecticut River, grew rapidly and challenged Springfield's primacy in the valley. In a process that characterized many of the early large towns of New England, outlying parts of Springfield revolted against residents in the town center. Beginning with the decision to divide the town into two parishes in 1704, Springfield became wracked with division and a spirit of decentralization that by the end of the Revolution resulted in the creation of four new towns, Ludlow, Longmeadow, West Springfield, and Wilbraham. Lacking dynamic leaders, facing other rivals, and stripped of its outlying lands, by 1790 Springfield had declined in relative importance. With 1,574 residents it was the third-largest town in Hampshire County, lagging slightly behind Northampton and West Springfield. Given the influx of population into western Massachusetts, it seemed inevitable to most people that a large urban center would emerge in the upper Connecticut River Valley, but in 1790 it was by no means inevitable that Springfield would be this center. West Springfield had nearly as many merchants and artisans and had better land for farming; Northampton, further away from Hartford, seemed equally or better situated to tap the hinterland. Thus, Springfield, the preeminent urban center of seventeenth-century western Massachusetts, entered the national period as one of three important towns in the area vying for supremacy.⁸

By contrast, the fortunes of Hartford and New Haven seemed nowhere nearly as ambiguous in 1790. From their inception in the late 1630s, these two towns were destined by location and political circumstances to grow steadily in importance. Hartford, the middle of the three river towns that evolved into the colony of Connecticut, received the most influential ministers and enterprising merchants from the westward migration of Massachusetts Puritans; New Haven, possessed of a fine harbor on Long Island Sound, was founded by Puritans of high social rank from England who devoted themselves to establishing their town as a mercantile center. Both towns were capitals of a colony and when New Haven and the river towns amalgamated in 1665, they became the co-capitals of Connecticut and the county seats of the newly-created counties of Hartford and New Haven. Thus, geography, history, superior leadership, and political centrality combined to ensure that they would grow and prosper. Throughout the colonial period, neither of the two towns had any serious rival in their imme-

diate vicinity. By 1790, they nurtured impressive merchant communities numbering over one hundred in each. Development in the center of each town was complex, consisting of several major streets devoted almost entirely to business and crafts; exotic (by New England standards) retail stores sold a variety of wares such as imported wines, wigs, and French fashions that were bought by a sophisticated and socially differentiated population; and each had such urban attributes as dancing clubs, newspapers, and regular postal service. In both size and atmosphere a visitor to either of these towns had the sense of being in a provincial city. In 1784, the General Assembly of Connecticut formally recognized this development by incorporating the two as cities.⁹

Probably any informed resident of Connecticut in 1790 would have predicted a glorious future for Hartford and New Haven. But, these two cities were not the only bright stars in Connecticut's urban constellation. While neither of them were challenged in their immediate vicinity, three other Connecticut towns, distant from them, did match the two co-capitals in economic and social development. Middletown, New London, and Norwich, also incorporated as cities in 1785, shared the same urban attributes as Hartford and New Haven. All three were ports founded later than Hartford and New Haven and all three thrived in the eighteenth century with the rapid growth of the West Indian trade. None of the three had the political preeminence of being a co-capital, but since all three had grown more rapidly in the eighteenth century than Hartford and New Haven and had caught up with the two early urban centers, an informed citizen would have undoubtedly predicted great success for them as well. Norwich, in particular, had a meteoric rise in the mid- and late-eighteenth century and seemed destined to become the dominant urban center of eastern Connecticut.¹⁰

Few observers of Connecticut in 1790, however, could have predicted the rise of Bridgeport. In theory, Bridgeport did not become an independent political entity until 1821 when the General Assembly incorporated it as a town: until then, it was a village or borough with some of its residents subject to the jurisdiction of the town of Fairfield and some to Stratfield. In reality, farmers moving to the Bridgeport area from Fairfield and Stratfield had begun to think of themselves as a community since the 1650s. Those feelings were manifested in a series of steps towards local autonomy. In 1678 they petitioned the General Assembly asking to be freed from school taxes in the parent towns in order to support their own schools. In 1690, forty-six taxpayers of "Poquonnock, risen and advanced to maturity and ripeness, and grown more populous," asked to be incorporated into an independent ecclesiastical society: the petition, denied then, was granted four years later. Poquonnock's name was changed to Fairfield Village and changed again in 1701, this time to Stratfield. As a village with its own church and schools, Stratfield prospered, growing to approximately 850 people by 1733, the only year prior to the 1790s for which population data are available. In 1800, an act was passed incorporating the village, then called Newfield, as the Borough of Bridgeport. Borough status was ambiguous in Connecticut law and conveyed whatever rights the assembly chose to confer along with the act; in this case, the assembly gave Bridgeport nearly the same powers as a town. Incorporated as a town in 1821, Bridgeport became a city fifteen years later in 1836.¹¹

In 1790, however, Bridgeport was an agricultural village with a population of less than 3,000 people. Aside from the fact that it had not been incorporated, Bridgeport was similar to any one of two dozen towns along the coast and the Connecticut River Valley. It had a couple of merchants, a village center, taverns, a few shops, and many part-time artisans: this was a normal mixture of the commercial activity common to most towns. The only hint one might have had of conditions that might lead to Bridgeport's future success came during the Revolution when military events made people aware of the superior nature of the village's harbor. The harbor was deep and provided ready access to shore but more importantly, some promontories provided more safety from hostile attack to ships lying at anchor than any other coastal harbor in Connecticut. Due to this, Bridgeport served as one of the centers of privateering in the Revolution. With hindsight, one can see that the transition from village to city began during the revolutionary years. But hindsight is available only to historians; in 1790, anyone compiling a glossary of important places in Connecticut would have placed the village of Newfield near the bottom of the list. The thought that Bridgeport would surpass Norwich, New London, and Middletown and rival Hartford and New Haven in economic development would have seemed preposterous.¹²

Providence was also in a transitory stage during the Revolutionary years but the transition was nearly complete and by 1790 Providence had emerged as the city destined to be the dominant urban center in Rhode Island. Located where the Seekonk River flows into the northern tip of Narragansett Bay, Providence, like Hartford and New Haven, was important from its inception. Being the first town in Rhode Island, one of the colony's co-capitals, and the center of dissent from orthodox Puritanism, assured Providence of a high level of visibility and prominence (notoriety to many New Englanders). Its strategic location at the most inland part of Narragansett Bay and its fine harbor assured it of substantial economic success. From the 1650s to the middle years of the eighteenth century, however, Providence played a supporting role to Newport's leading one. Newport, located on Aquidneck Island where Narragansett Bay meets the ocean, grew much more rapidly than Providence over the course of most of the colonial period. These two co-capitals always viewed each other as political, social, and economic rivals; but Newport tapped the hinterland around the bay much more effectively than Providence and developed a much larger import/export trade and network of retail shops. Newport's main advantage lay in the fact that as long as the overland highway system around the bay remained crude and undeveloped, people preferred to move their goods back and forth to Newport by small boats or canoes instead of carrying them overland to and from Providence. Newport's marvelous scenery and climate as well as its tolerant social milieu combined with its advantageous location to make it New England's second-most important port ranking only behind Boston between 1720 and 1770. During these "golden years," as Rhode Island historians call them, Newport attracted hundreds of merchants, artisans, and retailers, and was a major center of craft exports, shipbuilding, the slave trade, and rum production as well as agricultural exports and English imports.¹³

Providence's growth, not as spectacular as Newport's, was always steady. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Providence narrowed the gap

between its development and Newport's, and by 1790 the two towns were virtually even in most measurements of commercial activity. Moreover, in 1790 it was clear to most people that Providence was on the rise and Newport was on the decline. The development of an overland transportation system gave Providence an unbeatable advantage. When highway systems were developed, water became more of a barrier in getting goods to export merchants and Newport, located on an island and possessing no natural hinterland, found itself increasingly cut off from the mainland. The Brown family of Providence recognized this advantage early and played a major role in capitalizing on it. No other New England city since Springfield in the seventeenth century enjoyed as effective "booster" support as the Brown's supplied to Providence's economic development. Events during the revolution cruelly added to Newport's problems and aided in the rise of Providence. Newport, helpless against sea attack by superior naval forces, was burned and razed during the war and few merchants trusted their cargoes to Newport's docks and warehouses. Newport's loss was Providence's gain: protected by twenty miles of bay through which British ships would not dare travel, Providence provided security to citizens and cargoes. Newporters at the time felt that the Revolution destroyed their preeminence and, indeed, it certainly appeared that way to any observer in the 1780s. Most historians, however, maintain that changing economic circumstances fore-ordained the end of Newport's golden years and that the Revolution supplied merely the visible means to accomplish the virtually inevitable.¹⁴

In 1790 Providence, with over 6,000 residents, almost all supported by commercial activities, seemed assured of entering its own golden years. Visually, its grid of streets and network of retail shops, so many of which were new, presented an impressive picture to visitors. Its business community thrived and began to venture into new areas of trade with China, East India, Ireland, and the Baltic to supplement and to some degree replace the West Indian trade. As in many of the colonial cities, manufacturing and the production of items that had previously been imported from England increased dramatically in Providence during the Revolutionary years. Securities and currency exchange, always a matter of some concern for major colonial merchants, became a subject of much more interest. This activity resulted in the founding of Providence's first bank in 1790—a sign of economic sophistication. Rhode Island College (Brown University), founded in 1770 and the only college in the state, gave Providence a claim to intellectual distinction and a sense of self-esteem in cultural matters.¹⁵

Like all American centers of trade, Providence experienced a post-war recession, but its most serious problem in the late 1780s was removed when Rhode Island finally ratified the federal Constitution in 1790. Providence merchants feared a rise in the tide of instability created by the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. A majority of the smaller towns in Rhode Island, however, feared the powers of the new national government more than they feared instability. Only after a three-year acrimonious debate and threats that Providence would secede from Rhode Island did the state adopt the Constitution. When it did, Providence's economic leaders could turn from politics and devote their energies to Providence's and their own fortunes.¹⁶

Manchester, the last of New England's twentieth-century secondary centers to be founded, provided not the slightest hint that it would one day be an important economic entrepôt. First settled in 1729 and incorporated in 1751, Derryfield (Manchester's original name) was one of the least consequential towns in southern New Hampshire. With a population of 362 in the census of 1790, it had no schoolhouse, no distinguished residents or patrons, no permanent minister, nor was it a shire town. A few locally prominent families, the Starks, Goffes, Moores, and Huses dominated the town meeting but they were in the main much like their neighbors—small farmers, pious Congregationalists, and parochial in outlook. A few part-time artisans could be found among the farmers and one or two small shops retailed some essential goods, but Manchester was almost as close to a poor and purely agrarian village as one could find in New England. Nor did Manchester's geography or location portend to favor its growth. The town was irregularly shaped and less than thirty-five square miles, almost all of which consisted of light, sandy unproductive soil; it was not situated on any major highway or trade route; and, although situated on the Merrimack River, one-quarter mile of rapids at Manchester made the river unnavigable.¹⁷

One would have had to be a visionary to have correctly predicted the future of Manchester. Visionaries, while rare, occasionally do exist and Manchester seems to have had one, Samuel Blodgett. Regarded by his neighbors as eccentric—one called him “a demented old man bent upon squandering money in a wild scheme that would profit no one”—as early as 1790, Blodgett planned a canal around the rapids in the Merrimack River that would make Derryfield the “Manchester of America.” Blodgett lived to see the canal built but not long enough to see it turn a profit or dramatically change the face of the village; nor, incidentally, did he live long enough to see Derryfield adopt the name he suggested. When he died in 1807, Derryfield was still a small agricultural village distinguished only by the fact that it lay on an expensive canal.¹⁸

In 1790, it seemed obvious to people that if New Hampshire did spawn a great metropolis it would be Portsmouth, its major port and capital throughout the colonial period. With over 6,000 residents, Portsmouth had blossomed over the eighteenth century into one of the major secondary cities of the colonies and it was comparable to Hartford, New Haven, and Providence. It had a thriving merchant and artisan community, was one of the most important shipbuilding centers in the colonies, and had the twin advantages of being the first-settled town and the capital of New Hampshire. Visitors to Portsmouth in the late colonial period marveled at its many mansions, churches, retail shops, and bustling atmosphere. Although its economy had been injured by the Revolution, it was reasonable to assume that Portsmouth would reassert its primacy in northern New England. Basic demographic changes that saw a movement of settlers to the Connecticut and upper Merrimack river valleys, and the shift of southern New Hampshire's economy from lumber and food production to manufacturing, however, would make this reasonable assumption wrong.¹⁹

To return to the two questions raised at the beginning of this essay, the colonial background of the seven cities does seem to provide some clues to their success but by no means was this success a foregone conclusion in 1790. Three

of the seven, Hartford, New Haven, and Providence, were important provincial cities and showed every sign of being on the ascent. However, other provincial cities of similar accomplishments and promise showed potential that was never realized. One of the seven, Springfield, had experienced a relative decline in esteem and influence and faced a questionable future. Three of the seven, Bridgeport, Manchester, and Worcester foretold nothing of future greatness. In 1790, early settlement seemed crucial to success: all four of the important towns had been settled in the 1630s, the decade of the great Puritan migration. The three unimportant towns were settled in the second and third waves of expansion that took settlers to less desirable locations. Of course, it is difficult to argue that early settlement *per se* created success since, not surprisingly, the earlier settlers founded towns in the best locations. The good judgement of New England's founding Puritans in selecting sites for towns may have been as important a factor as early settlement.

All seven of the towns had advantageous locations, but there is a great deal of danger in overstating geography as a determinant of success. Obviously, creating an urban entrepôt in the face of adverse physical circumstances is difficult and one would not expect a city to thrive on landlocked soil of poor quality isolated from all trading routes. Of the seven only Providence, located at the innermost point of Narragansett Bay, had a location of indisputable superiority. New Haven and Bridgeport had fine harbors, but so did New London and Fairfield. Hartford's location on the Connecticut River was probably not as advantageous as Norwich's location on the Thames River. Springfield, West Springfield, and Northampton provided equal opportunities for serving as the center of the upper Connecticut River Valley and western Massachusetts. Worcester's main geographical advantage was man-made and relative, not intrinsic; it was well-spaced between other major centers and lay on highways connecting them. Manchester required the intervention of man to build a canal in order to have a site suitable for urban growth and development. And, of course, military events and changing economic circumstances could change favorable locations to unfavorable ones and vice-versa as residents of Newport and Portsmouth learned. Geography, thus, played an important role but a quick survey of the losers in the process of urbanization shows that some of them also had physical advantages and that location cannot fully explain the distribution of central places.

The importance of being a center of government cannot be completely separated from the advantages of early settlement and favorable geography. First settled communities and accessible ones capable of supporting large populations were more likely to be chosen as capitals and county seats. Hartford, New Haven, and Providence were capitals, and Springfield and Worcester were county seats. Worcester seems singular in deriving much growth from its governmental functions that would otherwise have taken place in neighboring towns. Hartford, New Haven, Providence, and Springfield would have been prominent places even if they were not government centers: Worcester clearly would not have been. On the other hand, Bridgeport's growth was retarded because not only was it not the center of any county governmental functions, it did not possess its own town government. Although towns such as Worcester might be elevated from average to above-average status by being named county seats, a

town like Manchester would be too far below average to be considered a possibility for a shire town. Political and economic centrality were mutually reinforcing.

Finally, although the force of individual initiative is always difficult to measure, it seems clear that superior leadership helped elevate some colonial towns above their counterparts. The Pynchons' energies were instrumental in seventeenth-century Springfield's rise to prominence; Providence was home to Roger Williams and many of early Rhode Island's distinguished settlers; the leading ministers and merchants who migrated from Massachusetts to Connecticut settled in Hartford; and New Haven was founded by wealthy merchants of high social standing who moved there expressly to create a trading center. Of course, some towns that did not enjoy unusual growth had distinguished residents who were unable to "boost" them to prominence—not all community patrons succeeded. In each of the four major secondary centers that had emerged by 1790, a core of early settlers can be identified whose presence and abilities were crucial to the town's growth. It is not at all far-fetched to think that if the Puritan traders who settled in New Haven had instead chosen Bridgeport as their site, the two cities might have exchanged roles in the colonial period.

Historians are often asked and invariably loathe to predict the future. Perhaps the profession has been too successful in persuading the public that a knowledge of history is essential for any society if it wants to deal effectively with the present. The public now seems to think that those who know the past must know—at least in part—the future. Historians' predictions, however, are like those of the weatherman and race-track touts: despite being informed by a huge amount of data, they are only marginally more accurate than that of the average person. Hindsight tempts us to believe that many of the patterns of twentieth-century urban growth could have been predicted in 1790. Many of New England's biggest cities today were big cities then by the standards of the late eighteenth century. A couple of quick alternative possibilities, however, will show the folly of this certitude. Boston, occupied by the British during the Revolution, is overtaken by Providence which now becomes the dominant New England central place. Boston, like Newport, declines as a city and becomes an urban museum. Northampton, Massachusetts, closer to the farming lands of the newly-settled areas of northern Vermont and New Hampshire becomes the major entrepôt of the upper Connecticut River Valley. Further away from the gravitational pull of New York than was New Haven and located at the mouth of a much more important river, New London becomes Connecticut's leading seaport. Portsmouth maintains its primacy as the maritime center of New England's northern coast. If the above developments sound preposterous, they were real possibilities in 1790 and might have been predicted by an intelligent observer. Although urban development between 1790 and the twentieth century seems smooth and organic, the inevitable quality of this evolution is a trick played on us by the arrogance of hindsight. A combination of geography, history, human will, and accident created the urban landscape of 1790. These same factors and others, unforeseen then, transformed it into the urban landscape of today.

NOTES

1. William Lincoln, *History of Worcester, Massachusetts, From its Earliest Settlement to September, 1836* (Worcester, 1862), 11-12. Lincoln provides a clear and detailed narrative of Worcester's early years. Benjamin W. Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts: A History* (Millwood, N.Y., 1979), 213 discusses the importance of the roads through Worcester.
2. Lincoln, *History of Worcester*, 16-54; Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts*, 128-129. See Douglas Leach, *The Northern Colonial Frontier, 1607-1763* (New York, 1966), chap. VII for a discussion of the effects of war on town founding in Western Massachusetts.
3. Lincoln, *History of Worcester*, 57-64, 139-140; Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts*, 134-135.
4. Lincoln, *History of Worcester*, 190-199, 212-216, 248-250; Charles Hersey, *History of Worcester, Massachusetts From 1836 to 1861* (Worcester, 1860), introduction: *Collections of the Worcester Society of Antiquity*, ed. Franklin P. Rice (Worcester, 1881-1908), VIII, 158-177. In his exhaustive studies of colonial towns and cities Carl Bridenbaugh discusses at length the development of secondary towns but provides no reference to Worcester, an indication of its relative unimportance. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in The Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York and London, 1938); and Bridenbaugh *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York and London, 1955).
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