Between Salem and Zanzibar stretched a reciprocal trade held together by fibers of cotton. From the early to mid-nineteenth century, when American industry emerged out of federal-era international commerce, these port cities maintained a familiarity with each other that was visualized in cloth and gave rise to some of the industrial architecture of Salem. Although brief in nature, the history of the Salem-Zanzibar trade was one of the many “genealogies of globality” emerging from commercial and maritime histories of the early nineteenth century.1 This chapter maps just one of the wide-ranging circuits of exchange in eastern seas in which New England played a strong part. Salem’s trade with Zanzibar occurred on the brink of a new era of domestic production in New England and demonstrates the links between global maritime capitalism and industrialization. By no means comprehensive, this chapter presents an initial exploration into the material means by which trade connected two otherwise disparate places. It is, then, a historical narrative of the globalized relationship between production and consumption, and how these processes had a tangible impact on the changing landscape, economic structures, and aesthetic sensibilities of a New England port city.

By the early nineteenth century, one could find docked in Salem “vessels which brought from all countries tribute. . . . [Salem’s] merchandise warehouses contained silks from India, tea from China, spices from Batavia, gum copal from Zanzibar.”2 This description of Derby Street, which runs parallel to Salem Harbor and is now a historic district, is just one of hundreds of accounts in which the city is positioned as a gateway to the world (figure 15.1). Its founders in the seventeenth century undoubtedly chose to settle there for its maritime geography, situated as it is on a peninsula, with rivers on either side, and most
parts of the town readily accessible by water. It was “from the first and of necessity, a maritime place.” Accounts such as *The Old Ship Masters of Salem* (1905) or *Historical Sketches of Salem* (1879), written by proud Salemites reflecting on their fathers’ and grandfathers’ generation, provide us with detailed and complicated narratives of the city, intertwining biography, political economy, and urban history. What becomes abundantly clear in these accounts is that the history of Salem’s far-flung maritime trade was one of the city’s most important characteristics, integrated into the shape, the structure, and the meaning of the city itself. Not only is Salem described as a gateway in and out of which vessels of all shapes streamed, in these accounts it also becomes a repository—aend point—as goods, artifacts, capital, and people flowed in from all over the world. Furthermore, merchants, the central actors in this narrative, are depicted as history makers themselves, providing the city with its very identity as well as funding its infrastructure and institutions.

Commerce was central to Salem’s organization and meaning. The trade with Zanzibar, an island on the east coast of Africa, emerged after Salem’s zenith as a maritime center. It was described by New England mariners as having a pleasing beachfront port, presided over by the harem of an “imaum” and a low bamboo hut serving as custom house—“like anything but a custom-house,
according to our notions of the importance of such an edifice,” said one New England whaler. Sailors were also impressed by the looming slave castle built by the Portuguese (figure 15.2). Zanzibar became important after the port town’s exchanges with other commercial centers in the Indian and Pacific Oceans declined, and as the structure of the region was changing from a mercantile to an industrial economy based on textile mills, a material shift with no better signifier, perhaps, than cotton itself.6

As other chapters in this volume show, the latter decades of the eighteenth century brought merchants from New England into new markets in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Although the global commerce of Salem slowed in the 1770s and 1780s, it had revived by the early 1800s with the opening of the India trade. In accounts of Salem’s maritime history, Europe, the West Indies, India, and China are portrayed as well known and established destinations, with some routes already a century old at the time of independence.7 Exchanging consumer goods made in New England for everything from porcelain to spices, this trade was extremely lucrative for Salem and Boston into the nineteenth century. But Salem faced two important challenges: competition from New York firms and the movement of merchants to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, owing to their better port facilities and commercial growth. By the 1830s, just as Salem’s trade with Zanzibar was taking off, these northern cities controlled much of the American trade with ports across India, China, the Atlantic, and Southeast Asia.8
Salem’s trade with Zanzibar was established through both commercial and political means. Traders and whalers probably had contact with the East African coast from the time they entered the Indian Ocean, but the first ship to sail directly from Zanzibar was the *Virginia*, which carried a cargo in 1826 to Salem. About six years later the merchant John Bertram—who would become one of the most important Salem traders with Zanzibar—after explorations around the Cape of Good Hope, Patagonia, and Pernambuco, sailed the *Black Warrior* to Zanzibar, returning to Salem in 1832 with the first large quantity of uncleaned gum copal.9 Sailing again to Zanzibar with goods of interest to the traders there, including cloth, Bertram set up the first Western trading house on the island. The venture proved successful and after a few years the merchant returned to Salem from where he oversaw the trade, leaving an agent behind in Zanzibar.

Bertram seems to have been the first merchant to begin a direct trade between the two places. However his ability to continue this trade was greatly eased by the diplomacy of one Edmund Roberts. Roberts, a well-connected young man with diplomatic and mercantile experience, chartered the *Mary Ann* of New Bedford, having decided that trading off East Africa and Zanzibar would be a good place to recoup recent financial losses. On arriving in 1827, he found that only British merchants were permitted to trade freely in Zanzibar. By the nineteenth century, Zanzibar was under the control of Oman under the rule of Said bin Sultan, who extended his influence throughout the Persian Gulf and East Africa. The sultan drew his lineage from the Al-Busaid dynasty founded in 1744, which had managed to retain much of its autonomy in East Africa by making concessions to the British in the eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the Yaaruba dynasty of Oman had repelled the Portuguese from the coast of Oman and by 1698 had controlled the entire East African coast.10

When the sultan visited Zanzibar the following year, 1828, Roberts obtained an audience. As Roberts complained of British monopolies, the sultan saw an opportunity to obtain American munitions against his enemies at home and abroad and to avoid complete dependence on Europe. He suggested a commercial treaty. Returning home and obtaining a special commission from President Jackson to negotiate commercial treaties in the Indian Ocean, by September 21, 1833, Roberts had negotiated a treaty that gave Americans the status of “nation most favored”—positioning them on an equal footing with the British. Receiving full authority to travel and trade without restrictions in the sultan’s dominions, Americans were to be charged no more than a 5 percent levy on cargoes that landed in port. They were also given full consular and diplomatic
protection. While Roberts was negotiating the treaty, Salem men like Bertram were busy making sure they could secure the East African trade for themselves. Between 1832 and 1834, of the thirty-two American vessels docking in Zanzibar, twenty were from Salem. Only nine European vessels entered during the same period.\(^{11}\)

In engaging in trade with Zanzibar, Salem merchants were embedding themselves, not for the first time, in an already long-standing Indian Ocean commercial network that included Zanzibar, Oman, Mauritius, and India, as well as coastal East Asian cultures from Java to China. Historians of the Indian Ocean have shown it to be a truly multicultural community, “a world dominated not by any single monopolizing superpower, but by the concept of free trade in which innumerable port city-states flourished.”\(^{12}\) The scope of Indian Ocean trade could often be read on the bodies of its inhabitants—in their physical features and clothing—and trade provided an important system for encouraging both economic exchange and cultural understanding. There was, it seems, a sense of familiarity between these port city populations, and merchants were often accepted as, or almost as, locals. In a sense, this oceanic culture created something like a “maritime” identity that, if it did not transcend, certainly expanded the limitations of merchants’ local or national identity. This cosmopolitanism was on display in Zanzibar, where merchants of all ethnicities and nationalities lived and interacted. While other Western merchants, including the Portuguese and the British, had also been involved in this network of commerce, what set American traders apart, to locals at least, was that Americans did not, unlike the Europeans, seek any territorial or imperialistic expansion in the area, even though they certainly intended to gain economic influence and privileges through trade.\(^{13}\)

In 1841, the British official Atkins Hamerton sailed into Zanzibar as an agent of the East India Company and representative of the British government. On his arrival, Indian and British traders almost immediately began to complain of the monopoly on the trade that came to and from East Africa through Zanzibar, a monopoly controlled by the American consul Richard Waters and customs officer Jairam Sewji, that prevented outsiders from competing in the Zanzibar market. This was the time of Britain’s supremacy, its empire extending across the globe. Later, when Hamerton went to visit the sultan, he saw two pictures hung up on either side of the sultan’s chair: “the subjects were naval engagements between American and English ships; the ship of England is represented as just being taken by the Americans, and the English ensign is being hauled down and the American hoisted at the masthead.”\(^{14}\) This intriguing story reveals just how quickly and completely Americans came to master a for-
eign trade entrepôt and monopolize the trade with East Africa. This is evident in views sketched by J. Ross Browne, an artist aboard an American whaler that visited Zanzibar in the 1840s, and published in New York in 1846 as *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*. In Browne’s image, the American flag flies alone above the white port buildings (figure 15.3).

The East African consumption of New England cotton cloth, which they called *merekani*, had two profound implications for Salem merchants and the local industries of their town, changing the landscape of the city. In the face of competition from cities like Boston and New York for overseas trade, Salem’s relationship with Zanzibar provided it with a market for its own local manufactures as well as raw material for its local industries — such as hides and gum copal — important to Salem’s leather works and furniture businesses. In exchange, Zanzibar merchants bought a large amount of New England-produced cotton cloth. While there are few samples of this plain cloth surviving today, cloth labels from Lowell and Salem sewn onto the large textile rolls do survive (figures 15.4, 15.5).

Gum copal was a fossilized resin resembling amber that was generally found several feet below living copal trees in the hinterlands of what is now modern Tanzania, roughly from the northern Wami River to the Rovuma River in the south. Here it was collected by gangs of copal diggers, who would first probe to prospect for the fossil gum beneath the trees, and then if it was found, dig a complete square around the tree to the depth of about three feet. The resin
Figure 15.4 (Above) Tremont Mills Blue Sheetings, Cloth Label, from Tremont Mills, Lowell. American Textile History Museum, Lowell, MA, 0000.453.703.

Figure 15.5 (Right) Naumkeag Steam Mills, Salem, Cloth Label. American Textile History Museum, Lowell, MA, 0000.453.456.
was most likely to be found during the rainy season when soils were softer and digging easier. Although it had been traded in the Indian Ocean for thousands of years along with other resins, it was the development of a middle-class consumer culture in America and Europe that created a boom in the trade. The increasing demand for finished furniture, pianos, and—most important—carriages required large amounts of varnish. Gum copal’s properties gave rise to the production of varnishes that “dried quickly, resisted cracking in the sun and deterioration in moist climates, were elastic and had pleasing shades.”16 This was especially important for carriages and, later, railroad cars. The resin was collected from coastal and inland stations by Indian middlemen and then sent to Zanzibar to be cleaned and sorted. In this way, hinterland communities supplying coastal traders with the resin were able to, at the very least, gain access to imported commodities like cotton cloth and firearms, insert themselves into the coastal economy, shore up local patronage, and establish some territorial control.

In 1832, John Bertram’s Black Warrior returned to Salem with the largest cargo of gum copal yet received in America, and “makers of fine varnish and lacquers gobbled it up greedily.”17 By 1845, American traders dominated the gum copal market, taking 42 percent of copal in comparison with 28 percent by India. In 1859, Americans took 68 percent of the copal. Although it was cleaned and sorted in Zanzibar, Salem merchants preferred to do it themselves, and in 1835, Jonathan Whipple opened his factory, the Whipple Gum Copal Factory at 35 Turner Street. Beginning with four or five men, by the late 1850s his factory was cleaning a million and a half pounds of the resin per year. At first the copal was laboriously cleaned with knives. However, Whipple found that the resin could be cleaned more quickly by letting it soak in alkali baths overnight. The next day it was placed on large platforms in the open air and carefully dried and brushed, after which it was sorted according to size and color.18 After Whipple’s death in 1850, the factory was taken over by his son under the name Stephen Whipple and Brothers. Only in 1861 did the factory start to decline, when an import duty of ten cents per pound was imposed on the uncleaned gum. After this, it tended to be cleaned in Zanzibar before arriving in Salem, leading to the eventual abandonment of the business. Nevertheless, Whipple’s factory was one of the largest employers in Salem in its time and served furniture manufacturers across the eastern seaboard.19

Developed directly through the trade with Zanzibar, the factory became an important landmark in Salem, featured as a significant manufacturing enterprise in commercial registries and descriptions of the city.20 The sheer amount of resin passing through the factory must have also been a constant reminder of just how closely Salem’s economic well-being aligned with the port of Zanzi-
bar. The factory clearly marked Salem’s connection to a port city thousands of miles away, as its developing local industries were well supplied by the natural resources of East Africa. However the gum copal itself may have provided other ways of reminding those who handled it or used it of these connections. Employers, workers, and perhaps even users would have surely been aware of more intimate details. Perhaps they could read the changes in the supply of the material and chart which periods were better for the resin’s collection and in this way come to understand something of the ecology of a continent they would, likely, never visit, but whose seasons had a direct effect on their working lives. From working with the resin, they would have learned its physical characteristics, its color and texture, perhaps come across the odd fossilized flora and fauna as they cleaned the resin, and they would have, perhaps, come to understand how it was formed and collected in a geography so unlike their own. Those who used the resin to make varnishes would have known how the hard crystal-like resin, sometimes in the shape of a lozenge, would provide the strongest protection, the most pleasing shades and the best looking finish required by their customers. This blinking amber substance would have continually reminded employers, workers, and consumers alike of their shared commercial and economic interest with people far away.

Salemites were able to monopolize this trade in gum copal, a trade that greatly aided Salem’s local furniture industry and the work of furniture makers, some of whom, such as Abraham Kimball, were known for their fine finishes. More generally, too, the rise in demand for a resin like gum copal appears to, if not mark, then at least occur alongside an increasing desire for the accumulation of middle-class symbols of status by New Englanders. Perhaps then the rise in the consumption of furnishings along with the growth of industries such as carriage making—both products that required the resin—in the region might better signify the increasing affluence of New England consumers. Such trade-related developments also signal a shift from a craft-based economy to an industrial one: a shift that was occurring across New England.

In return for gum copal, Salem merchants provided East African traders with goods that gave impetus to its local industries. Ships traveled from Salem with beads, wire, and furniture. In 1859, for instance, Americans exported almost one thousand clocks and three thousand chairs to Zanzibar. But their most important export was a type of cotton cloth given the name merekani, which means “American” in Swahili. In fact, Salem’s monopoly of the gum copal trade was in large part due to the great interest East Africans took in this cotton cloth. By the 1830s, it had become even more popular than the indigos from Kutch in northwestern India, and the American trade surpassed
the Indian-Zanzibar textile trade. In the 1840s, merekāni had become the most imported article of imported clothing for East Africans.25 By 1859, Americans were sending almost five million yards of merekāni to Zanzibar. It attained widespread use across the region, not least because of its durability.26 Thanks to the popularity of merekāni, Salem merchants gained control over the Zanzibar trade fairly quickly.27 British trading houses based in Zanzibar complained of their inability to sell British-made cloth to Zanzibar consumers, even when they falsified the manufacturers’ label to replicate American-made cloth. East African buyers were careful consumers: merekāni had a particular texture, feel, and even smell that these traders looked for, and it could not, it seemed, be imitated.28

The cloth was used in various ways, and its importance seems to have lain in its ability to be re-manufactured. After traders bought the material, artisans and tailors altered it. These alterations included dyeing, sewing colored strips onto the cloth, adding frays and fringes, altering designs, and incorporating designs.29 After the changes had been incorporated into the material, it was taken by caravan owners and merchants to be sold to consumers living in the interior. It was the changing fashions of these customers that Zanzibari traders had to keep abreast of with their alterations and additions.30

Similar changes were made to the beads and wire that were traded between Salem and Zanzibar.31 The material was also used for burial cloth or sailcloth and as a form of currency throughout East Africa. Some locals also wore it wrapped around them with the factory stamp showing. Grant observed that when people acquired blue merekāni with the label “Massachusetts Sheeting” they would wear the cloth around their bodies so as the label was clearly visible (figures 15.4, 15.5). Such a display accorded the wearer considerable social status.32 The stamp served as an important fashion symbol as well as authenticated American-made merekāni. By the 1840s, moreover, imported goods were more widely circulated within East African society, and it was not just the elites who could afford them. Any villager or trader who had produce valued by passing caravans, or could sell their goods at regional markets, could also buy imported goods. Thus the increasing commodification of social relationships in East Africa also meant imported goods were more accessible across the area than they once were.33

This unbleached calico was initially produced in the Lowell mills thirty miles west of Salem, mills that specialized in manufacturing material of this texture and quality.34 Indeed, similar types of cloth — but of perhaps coarser texture — were also bought in order to clothe plantation slaves.35 New England become the industrial center of the United States in the first half of the nine-
teenth century in large part owing to its production of cotton cloth. The cotton textile trade effected a powerful change across the New England landscape on both a social and economic level. It industrialized the region like no other commodity, its production and consumption giving rise to factory villages and a set of commercial relations between workers, employers, and consumers that dramatically transformed the agrarian system and cottage industries that had hitherto shaped New England. The first cotton-spinning factory was opened in 1793 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, by Samuel Slater; in 1813, large-scale manufacturing of cloth began when the Boston Associates of merchants established the Boston Manufacturing Company in Waltham, Massachusetts. Here raw cotton was processed into finished cloth. By 1840, the expanding plantation system of the United States was the primary producer of raw cotton for the British textile industry and also supported the industrialization occurring in the northern cities of the United States. Lowell became a primary center of cotton manufacture. Cloth from Lowell was transported via rail and ship through agents in Boston and New York, and then onward south or east across the Atlantic. In newspapers and print publications cotton became a metaphor for the connectivity of commerce as its fibers literally connected the plantations in the South with factories and markets in the North, in Europe, and in Britain.

The greater accessibility East Africans had to American-produced cloth led to a rise in demand that required manufacturers at Lowell to increase their production. However, by the late 1830s and early 1840s, this new market caused a strain on manufacturers who could no longer match growing demand. As a result of a decrease in manufacture and the inflation of the price of cotton cloth, the cost of Lowell cloth rose above the projected returns from East Indian trade, a financial blow for Salem merchants. It was this impending crisis in their trade that Salem historian P. H. Northway argues provided encouragement for Salem merchants to invest in the first steam-powered cotton factory to be built in America, the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company. The factory was opened in the 1840s by a former shipmaster Nathaniel Griffin—in a concrete example of the late-federal period shift from trade to production, from maritime capital to industrial capital. At the time of its founding it was the biggest cloth factory in the United States, and in the late 1840s, its output was greater than that of its competitors, and its products were consistently judged to be the best in the nation, winning great acclaim at American trade shows in Boston and New York. The factory was located on Harbor Street in South Salem, and at its inception operated 29,696 spindles, 642 looms, and employed six hundred employees (figure 15.6).
The mill was one of the most important manufacturers in Salem, an important architectural and economic presence in the city. Although it produced other types of cloth, such as cotton drills, it was the manufacture of cloth for the East African trade that underpinned the factory’s output.42 The mill was extremely successful, and as Salemites tightened their monopoly of the trade, including gaining greater control over the design and variety of the cloth they exported, the volume of merekani exports grew.43 Between 1855 and the beginning of the American Civil War, “East Africans consumed more than twenty-nine million yards of merekani cloth.”44 This vast manufacturing network had its roots in the early Salem–Indian Ocean voyages, forged in the wake of American independence.

As a landmark the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Factory was an imposing sign of Salem’s success in a global market. It also marked the region’s importance domestically with its technological innovation, its significant manufacturing output, the quality of its products, and the number of operatives it employed. It was, moreover, an operation that emerged directly from Salem’s dependence on the East African trade. While this was evident from the factory’s production, it
could be seen on another level too. The mill’s later president would be Richard Waters, an American shipping agent and then the first American consul in Zanzibar, a man who knew the trade in Zanzibar like no other. Its board of directors included many men who were heavily involved in the export trade to Zanzibar. Among the business community of Salem more broadly, merchants with strong links to the Zanzibar trade took up positions of influence at banks, insurance companies, and factories.

These specific instances of the economic and industrial interdependence of Salem on its trade with Zanzibar had a perceptual importance too. Just as East Africans used their economic ability to fashion and mark themselves as stylish and cosmopolitan through their trade with the United States, Salem merchants and inhabitants prided themselves on a cosmopolitanism gained through international trade. Salemites were proud of their knowledge of places like Zanzibar, although they were distant and unseen. Their involvement in these networks of trade gave rise to what Prestholdt has termed a “global consciousness,” an attitude that most certainly also evolved alongside the industrialization of the region through international trade.

The American Civil War effectively cut off Salem’s cotton supplies. Following the war and with the resulting shifts in cotton production and manufacture, alongside the industrialization of cities like Bombay, Salem’s strong connections with Zanzibar through cotton and resin had all but come to an end by 1870. Cheap cloth from Bombay and England flooded the market, and while East Africans continued to show interest in American-made unbleached cotton cloth, this interest was not at the same level that it once was. The costs of exporting the cloth increased, and once-important Salem firms were overtaken by others from Boston, Providence, and New York. Although relatively short-lived, the Salem-Zanzibar trade in merekani cloth and gum copal resin provides us with an important moment in the history of commerce that shaped processes of production and consumption in early-nineteenth-century New England. Salem’s industrial growth was based, in large part, on the fashions and tastes of East African consumers. For merchants, traders, and townspeople of Salem, this Indian Ocean connection had a material impact on their economic, architectural, and social landscape, creating for them a perception of their local identity and international position that emerged from global relations.
Notes

4. The archipelago of Zanzibar was ruled by Arab sultans until the mid-nineteenth century, when it came under British colonial control, only gaining independence in the 1960s. Today it is a semi-autonomous region of Tanzania.
15. Ibid., 164.


25. Ibid., 62.

26. Ibid., 61.


32. Ibid.


38. See, for example, Andrew Ure, The Philosophy of Manufactures: Or, An Exposition of the Scientific, Moral, and Commercial Economy of the Factory System of Great Britain; Charles Knight, Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Great Britain, 1843); Baines, History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain.


41. Webber and Nevins, Old Naumkeag, 205.


43. Prestholdt, Domesticating the World, 64.

44. Ibid., 65.


46. Ibid., 372.

47. Prestholdt, Domesticating the World, 61, 190.
