

Defining Economic Classes in Colonial Massachusetts 1700-1776

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COLONIAL HISTORIANS frequently refer to the class structure of New England. It is commonplace to write about the class structure in subjective language and to casually use terms like 'upper,' 'middle,' and 'lower.' These terms are usually based on qualitative evidence or intuition and, while the evidence and intuition may be well grounded, the terms usually lack precision. Probate records when systematically sampled and arranged can provide the precision for defining economic classes that the subjective evidence lacks. A great deal of research has been done recently that utilizes probate records but no one has attempted to use them as indexes for a class structure over a long period of time.¹ Inventories of estates can be used to define economic classes in actual money values.

No one definition of classes, however, will suffice for the entire period 1700 to 1776. Massachusetts used five different currencies in this period, three of which were subject to high inflation. An estate of £500 between 1700 and 1720 would connote a great deal of wealth. By the middle of the century inflation had reduced £500 to an average amount. Even in any one year an estate of £500 in one currency might not be closely equal to an estate of £500 in another currency. The best meth-

¹Jackson Turner Main, in *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965), used probate records extensively to analyze economic classes but only in the Revolutionary period. He did not provide definitions for classes but instead examined their relationships to each other.

od of circumventing the dual problems of currency changes and inflation is to divide the eighteenth century into smaller time periods which would minimize inflation and then within the smaller time periods to translate all estates into a common currency.

Any definition of classes for Massachusetts that used the colony at large for its base would also be misleading. Massachusetts was too large and diverse a colony to allow any one geographical area to serve as an indicator for all classes. For the purpose of analysis, three different geographical areas representing different types of settlements were selected: Worcester County, a newly settled area in the first twenty years of the eighteenth century; Suffolk County with Boston excluded, the first settled county in the colony and predominantly prosperous and agricultural; and Boston, the mercantile center of New England.

The lists in this article divide the colonial part of the eighteenth century into three twenty-year periods, 1700-1720, 1720-1740, 1740-1760, and one sixteen-year period, 1760-1776. Each of the three geographical areas has a class distribution listed for each of the four time periods except for 1700-1720 in Worcester County where there were too few records for sampling. Fifty inventories were sampled for each place in each period (except again in Worcester County where forty sufficed) and listed in descending order. The number fifty was not chosen by whim but was carefully selected as the smallest number of estates that would accurately reflect the area being sampled. For the period 1720-1740 two different samples were drawn and compared. Not until fifty inventories were in each sample did the two samples closely correspond to one another.² Thus, fifty inventories became the minimum number required to ensure an accurate sample.

²The words 'closely correspond' are those of a historian making a decision based on historical criteria. I have decided that if the discrepancy between any two samples is less than five percent, this is an allowable error by a historian's standards. Thus, in drawing two different samples of fifty estates each between 1720 and 1740 and comparing them,

These lists can be a valuable working tool for any historian of colonial Massachusetts. They divide Massachusetts society into economic classes that have some objective basis in terms of money. The hazy assertion that a certain man was wealthy or poor can be replaced by the statement that he was in the top ten percent or the lowest ten percent of economic society. Historians and genealogists can find where the people they are studying stood economically in relation to the rest of society.

The values of the different types of currencies used in this period present a problem, but one that can be overcome. Currency questions in Massachusetts are surrounded by a bewildering network of confusion as they are in most of the colonies. Massachusetts first issued paper currency in 1690 and continued reissuing it until 1737.³ As early as 1691, the year after it was first issued, Massachusetts currency had depreciated 5 percent in value and by 1737 had fallen to one-fourth of its original value. In 1737 Massachusetts issued a new currency called New Tenor and gave to the old currency from between 1690 and 1737 the name Old Tenor. Old Tenor notes were exchanged for New Tenor ones at an official rate of £3 OT to £1 NT.⁴ In 1740 the General Court could no longer ignore the twenty-five percent depreciation of its 1737 New Tenor issue and a new issue of New Tenor was circulated. The 1737 New Tenor notes were then called Middle Tenor and the name New Tenor was then used only for the bills of the 1740 issue.⁵ Middle Tenor was rarely used thereafter, but all

the limits of each respective class within the samples never deviated by more than five percent, and in fact, usually deviated less. Statisticians call this a difference of means test. In statistical layman's terms, it simply means that if two samples are drawn from the same larger grouping and 'closely correspond,' then either of the samples is an accurate reflection of the larger grouping. I have, as a historian, chosen five percent error as the allowable rate and the samples do closely correspond when each has fifty estates within it. In Worcester County with a much smaller population, forty estates were used.

³Joseph B. Felt, *An Historical Account of Massachusetts Currency* (Boston, 1839), pp. 49-50.

⁴Felt, *Currency*, pp. 92-93.

⁵Felt, *Currency*, p. 96.

during the 1740s New Tenor and Old Tenor both circulated as bills of accounting and exchange, and both depreciated greatly. In 1750, in order to remedy the new depreciation, the General Court pegged an official exchange rate for both currencies which reflected the realities of the inflation. Simplifying a very involved formula, Old Tenor was accepted at £8 OT equalling £1 LM (Lawful Money) and New Tenor at a rate of £2 NT equalling £1 LM. Lawful Money was the official rate at which Old and New Tenor notes had to be accepted and was theoretically equal to Pound Sterling. However, when Old and New Tenor bills depreciated even more and the exchange rate was not changed, Lawful Money as a means of accounting slipped below the value of Pound Sterling.⁶ In 1753, Massachusetts officials, aghast at the runaway inflation of similar New Tenor in New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut which distressed Boston merchants, and aware of the depreciation of the colony's own New Tenor, sought to retire all Massachusetts currency issues. Massachusetts burned over £400,000 New and Old Tenor notes and issued no more currency during the colonial period (except for treasury scrip during the French and Indian War). However, more than 131,000 Old and New Tenor notes remained in circulation and still were accepted in the 1750s and 1760s at the Lawful Money rate of £8 OT to £1 LM and £2 NT to £1 LM.

For the present purposes of comparing probate inventory estates, the currency problem is not difficult. From 1700 to 1737 all estates were in the Massachusetts currency that was later called Old Tenor. From 1737 to 1750 estates may have been reckoned in Old Tenor which in this period was convertible to Lawful Money by dividing it by four or in New Tenor which in this period was equal to Lawful Money. After 1750, when the real inflation in Old and New Tenor was legally

⁶See, for example, the relative values of Lawful Money and Sterling in William Phillip's inventory (Suffolk County, 1772). Six hundred thirteen pounds Sterling equals 818 LM.

recognized, Old Tenor can be converted to Lawful Money by dividing it by eight and New Tenor can be converted to LM by dividing it by two. Usually, in the early 1750s, the inventory specified which currency was being used. Prior to 1753, if the inventory was not labelled, the currency was invariably Old Tenor. After 1753, when the Massachusetts issues were retired, estates were usually appraised in Lawful Money except for the occasional one that was appraised in Old Tenor, New Tenor, or Pound Sterling. Old and New Tenor were still convertible to Lawful Money at the familiar eight-to-one and two-to-one ratios and Pound Sterling could be converted to Lawful Money by multiplying it by one and a third. These were the standard conversion figures used down to 1776.

It cannot be definitely established what percentage of adult white males left probate records. Kenneth Lockridge has estimated that approximately twenty percent of them left wills and forty percent had inventories taken of their estates.⁷ Lockridge's conclusions are too well grounded in evidence to be disputed. He has compared the known male deaths of some New England areas and the existing probate records to arrive at these figures. Clearly, the twenty percent of the adult white male population who left wills are a biased selection since wealthy people were more inclined to worry about the distribution of their estates than poor people. However, it is not clear that the forty percent of the adult white male population that had inventories taken were an unrepresentative class. Lockridge believes they may or may not be representative and that our present demographic knowledge is not sophisticated enough to establish statistically the proposition either way. A Massachusetts law of 1649 specified that a probate court shall bring in a 'true inventory of all the known lands, goods, and debts of all deceased persons.'⁸ This was designed to remedy

⁷Kenneth Lockridge, 'A Communication,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXV (1968), 16.

⁸Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, 5 vols. (Boston, 1853-54), III, 172-173.

earlier problems of collection of debts and unscrupulous handling of estates. It provided that even 'traveling merchants, seamen, and other strangers' should have their goods inventoried and probated.⁹ There is no evidence that this law was disobeyed more for the poor and middle classes than for the wealthy classes. The broad language of the law shows that leaving out the lesser elements of society was not the intent and the probate inventories in existence show that neither was it the practice. Hundreds of inventories of men who died with just the clothing on their back and a hand tool testify that the amount of goods a man owned was not the criterion used to decide whether or not an inventory was taken or preserved. Why only forty percent of eighteenth-century New England men are represented by probate inventories will probably remain a mystery. It has recently been suggested that certain practical problems unrelated to the size of an estate, such as the expense, time, and travel involved, kept many people out of probate dockets.¹⁰ It is an untenable proposition to believe that the missing sixty percent had no goods worth inventorying and it is clear that the poor and indigent were represented in the extant forty percent. Possibly, the inventories might tend to have slightly fewer of the poorer people included but, if so, the tendency is slight.

Similarly, the definitions provided by these probate records will be biased by the fact that they are based on the oldest inhabitants in the colony. However, this bias and the bias caused by the possible inclusion of more of the well-to-do elements of society are unimportant because presumably the subjects historians will be comparing with the definitions will also be influenced by the same biases. That is, historians will only use these definitions to compare other men's wealth as found in their probate records also. For that purpose these definitions

⁹Shurtleff, *Records*, III, 280-281.

¹⁰Alice Hanson Jones, 'Wealth Estimates for the New England Colonies about 1770,' *Journal of Economic History*, XXXII (1972), 116.

are reliable, but they are not so for any other purpose, such as comparing tax lists with them.

Hence, the samples of fifty estates for each of the four different time periods are an accurate reflection of the society from which they were drawn. They were drawn at random from the three areas with the only stipulations being that all were from adult white males and all were gross not net inventories. Debts accompanying the inventories were not subtracted. Hopefully, the lists will enable historians to deal more objectively with economic classes in Massachusetts and suggest a method of dealing with them more objectively in other colonies.¹¹

For the convenience of historians who may wish to use these lists, they have been subdivided into five different economic classes:

- Class I, 91st percentile through 100th percentile;
- Class II, 71st percentile through 90th percentile;
- Class III, 31st percentile through 70th percentile;
- Class IV, 11th percentile through 30th percentile;
- Class V, 0 percentile through 10th percentile.¹²

Sample Estates 1, Suffolk County excluding Boston, 1700-1720.¹³

All estates between 1700-1740 in Massachusetts Old Tenor.

Class I, £913 and above, 91st percentile and above.

Class II, £446 through £912, 71st percentile through 90th.

Class III, £161 through £445, 31st percentile through 70th.

Class IV, £117 through £160, 11th percentile through 30th.

Class V, 0 through £116, 0 through 10th percentile.

¹¹Other examples of this type of work in other New England colonies may be seen in the author's 'Probate Inventories as a Source for Economic History in 18th Century Connecticut,' Connecticut Historical Society, *Bulletin*, XXXVII (1972), 1-9; and 'Defining Economic Classes in Colonial New Hampshire, 1700-1770,' *Historical New Hampshire*, XXVIII (1973), 53-62.

¹²Any labels placed on the five economic classes would be arbitrary. Recognizing this, however, one might still wish to describe members of Class I as 'wealthy,' those of Class II as 'prosperous,' of Class III as 'middle,' of Class IV as 'lower,' and those of Class V as 'poor.'

¹³The limits of each class have been formed by establishing a midpoint between the lowest estate in one class and the highest estate in the following class. This is a standard statistical method.

Sample Estates 2, Boston, 1700-1720.

- Class I, £2,746 and above, 91st percentile and above.
- Class II, £673 through £2,745, 71st percentile through 90th.
- Class III, £112 through £672, 31st percentile through 70th.
- Class IV, £35 through £111, 11th percentile through 30th.
- Class V, 0 through £34, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 3, Worcester County, 1720-1740.

- Class I, £1,328 and above, 91st percentile and above.
- Class II, £712 through £1,327, 71st percentile through 90th.
- Class III, £266 through £711, 31st percentile through 70th.
- Class IV, £121 through £265, 11th percentile through 30th.
- Class V, 0 through £120, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 4, Suffolk County excluding Boston, 1720-1740.

- Class I, £2,016 and above, 91st percentile and above.
- Class II, £1,373 through £2,015, 71st percentile through 90th.
- Class III, £498 through £1,372, 31st percentile through 70th.
- Class IV, £173 through £497, 11th percentile through 30th.
- Class V, 0 through £172, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 5, Boston, 1720-1740.

- Class I, £4,297 and above, 91st percentile and above.
- Class II, £1,072 through £4,296, 71st percentile through 90th.
- Class III, £112 through £1,071, 31st percentile through 70th.
- Class IV, £29 through £111, 11th percentile through 30th.
- Class V, 0 through £28, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 6, Worcester County, 1740-1760.

- All estates between 1740 and 1776 in Massachusetts Lawful Money.
- Class I, £476 and above, 91st percentile and above.
- Class II, £213 through £475, 71st percentile through 90th.
- Class III, £53 through £212, 31st percentile through 70th.
- Class IV, £15 through £52, 11th percentile through 30th.
- Class V, 0 through £14, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 7, Suffolk County excluding Boston, 1740-1760.

- Class I, £900 and above, 91st percentile and above.
- Class II, £447 through £899, 71st percentile through 90th.
- Class III, £165 through £446, 31st percentile through 70th.
- Class IV, £28 through £164, 11th percentile through 30th.
- Class V, 0 through £27, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 8, Boston, 1740-1760.

Class I, £1,824 and above, 91st percentile and above.

Class II, £384 through £1,823, 71st percentile through 90th.

Class III, £71 through £383, 31st percentile through 70th.

Class IV, £12 through £70, 11th percentile through 30th.

Class V, 0 through £11, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 9, Worcester County, 1760-1776.

Class I, £508 and above, 91st percentile and above.

Class II, £202 through £507, 71st percentile through 90th.

Class III, £63 through £201, 31st percentile through 70th.

Class IV, £19 through £62, 11th percentile through 30th.

Class V, 0 through £18, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 10, Suffolk County excluding Boston, 1760-1776.

Class I, £1,112 and above, 91st percentile and above.

Class II, £544 through £1,111, 71st percentile through 90th.

Class III, £186 through £543, 31st percentile through 70th.

Class IV, £77 through £185, 11th percentile through 30th.

Class V, 0 through £76, 0 through 10th percentile.

Sample Estates 11, Boston, 1760-1776.

Class I, £2,657 and above, 91st percentile and above.

Class II, £717 through £2,656, 71st percentile through 90th.

Class III, £35 through £716, 31st percentile through 70th.

Class IV, £15 through £34, 11th percentile through 30th.

Class V, 0 through £14, 0 through 10th percentile.

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