On the Inland Seas: Detroit and the Atlantic World

Common-place talks with Catherine Cangany, author of *Frontier Seaport: Detroit's Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepôt*, about Detroit's Atlantic connections, the persistence of local control, and the challenges of writing transnational history.

What made Detroit a "frontier seaport," or as it's described in the first chapter, "the seaport of the West" (9)?

Location, location, location. French explorer Antoine Laumet de Lamothe Cadillac, who founded Detroit in 1701, chose for his settlement a stretch of land along the Detroit River, which connects two of what colonial North Americans called the "inland seas," Lake Erie and Lake Huron (via Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River). He picked that strait (in French, *étroit*) in order to partner with Odawas, Hurons, Potawatomis, Ojibwes, and other area Native groups to augment France's stake in the fur trade. And in so doing, his settlement connected the frontier to the Atlantic world.


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Once Detroit's profitability seemed certain, European and Euro-American fur-trade merchants relocated to what Cadillac boasted would become the "Paris of New France," bringing with them their Atlantic networks and their access to the "goods of empire." That, in turn, enticed other groups of people to settle in Detroit and to establish complementary economies. As one example, under the British regime (1760-1796), Detroit surpassed Niagara to become the western hub for shipbuilding and repair. All nine of the armed vessels sailing Lake Erie in 1782 had been constructed at Detroit's naval yard.

In short, Detroit fulfilled the same functions as Atlantic port cities in the eighteenth century. It imported and exported goods through its harbor. It acted as a collection and distribution center. It was connected to a hinterland. It served as a conduit for people and information. It operated as a site of shipbuilding. It was home to a skilled and diverse workforce that plied port-related trades. And it fulfilled all of these functions 600 miles from the Atlantic coast.

Detroit first made its mark in the eighteenth century as a center of the fur trade. How did that influence the development of Detroit even after the fur trade began to decline?

The fur trade, by its very nature, was a global enterprise: the raw materials collected at Detroit were exported to Western Europe, where they were transformed into finished leather goods, and then exported again—as far east as Russia and China. By virtue of that lucrative economy, Detroit was drawn into the French and British Atlantic worlds, especially into the world of transnational merchandise and its related cultural practices, which Detroiters of all stripes were anxious to consume.

We have an image of culture in early Detroit looking something akin to the Fess Parker *Davy Crockett* serial: colonists in fringe and raccoon-skin caps. There certainly was some of that culture present, and Detroit's merchants capitalized on it, feeding Atlantic world consumers' stereotypes of the frontier. But it

was just as common to see Detroiters sporting imperial status symbols only a few months after their metropolitan debuts, whether the latest textiles, imprints of popular books, or specialty dining ware meant for cultured entertaining.

As a result of that engagement with the Atlantic, colonial Detroiters diversified their economy, experimenting with making fur-trade-related goods, most notably moccasins, which were crafted by local merchants for non-Native wearers around the Great Lakes and on the eastern seaboard. This was a significant achievement, as historians have assumed that colonial manufacturing efforts, particularly in the British Empire, were, by mercantilism's design, few and far between, to force the colonies to acquire everything through the mother country.

Value-added goods like moccasins relied to some degree on the fur trade's production, shipping, and distribution networks, but they also demanded new technologies, such as local manufactories, which foreshadowed Detroit's late nineteenth and twentieth-century forays into producing stoves, automobiles, and armaments.

That early infrastructure remained, even after the fur trade waned. Perhaps the most salient example pertains to transportation. For the first century of the settlement's existence, the fur trade relied on a winding route of rivers, lakes, and overland portages to carry people and goods from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes and back. Even delicate porcelain teacups and fragile microscopes were transported to Detroit this way—in good enough condition to be salable. That process changed in 1825 with the opening of the Erie Canal, which more directly connected the Atlantic Ocean with the Great Lakes, eliminating portages and allowing larger, heavier vessels to make the journey. The canal's construction had an instantaneous effect on Detroit's harbor, which became choked with an unprecedented number of ships, goods, and immigrants who caught the relocation bug known as "Michigan Fever." When the Erie Canal opened, Detroit was about the fiftieth largest city in the United States. By 1910 it had moved up to ninth largest, peaking at fourth largest in 1940. In the early twentieth century, the Detroit River was deemed the "Greatest Commercial Artery on Earth," facilitating about 24,000 boat trips and 67 million tons of merchandise per year—nearly twice what was carried through London and New York City combined. Location was still vital to Detroit's success more than two centuries after the colony's founding.

The second half of Frontier Seaport *focuses on what you describe as "frontier localisms" in Detroit. Can you explain what you mean by the term and how such practices shaped the growth of Detroit as a trading center?*

Despite economic and cultural affinity with the rest of the Atlantic world, political incorporation in early Detroit was another story. Because of the settlement's seasonal geographical isolation (it was inaccessible from the eastern seaboard for at least half of each year), coupled with myriad imperial

turnovers, Detroit was mostly left to manage itself. Except for governance of the fur trade, which remained an imperial preoccupation, Detroiters were left to take charge of the day-to-day running of their town. This gave rise to a number of unconventional social and administrative practices, which I term "localisms," that, although in direct opposition to imperial mandates, kept Detroit functional. For instance, for most of its history before Michigan became a state in 1837, Detroit lacked a comprehensive judicial system, with no practical means of compelling debt collection. Outside of prevailing upon the fort's commandant or the priest of Ste. Anne's Catholic Church to arbitrate, Detroiters were forced, at their own expense, to journey to Quebec (and later, under the American regime, first to Ohio and then to Indiana) to seek adjudication. Fed up with the entrenched system, in the British era, Detroit merchants created their own local arbitration court, serving as the unofficial magistrates and thereby keeping local matters under local control. That informal court system was revived in the early American era (which began in 1796) and persisted until Detroit finally received a full, local judiciary in 1805.

For that same determination to keep local matters under local control, we could also look to the rebuilding process after Detroit burned to the ground in the Great Fire of 1805. Newly arrived American residents, who had begun moving to Detroit after it joined the American fold in 1796, saw the catastrophe as a chance to rid Detroit of its French heritage and remake it in the image of East Coast cities. In laying out the new metropolis (envisioned by Augustus Woodward as a pleasing pattern of repeating hexagons), they also began filling in the Detroit River, to allow themselves to build in front of the longstanding French and British residents who had had riverfront properties. You can imagine how this went over. Those established residents worked on a number of fronts to sabotage the rebuilding process. They refused to recognize the new layout, instead rebuilding their homes in their old styles in rectilinear blocks. They ignored easements. They broke one surveyor's equipment. They spread false rumors about the new layout: some parcels of land would have no street access, some were too small to build on, and some would be located in the middle of the river. And they refused to follow the directive of Congress to furnish it with an official rebuilding plan by which they would abide. Two decades after the fire, Detroit still had not given Congress that plan, but all that while, its residents had carried on with their own ideas about reconstruction. Even today, if you look at a map of Detroit, you will see that only one-half of one of Woodward's hexagons was built (Grand Circus Park), and it is entirely circumscribed by the squares and rectangles insisted upon by the old guard.

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Some of Detroit's localisms had more direct economic consequences. When Detroit

became a U.S. holding in 1796, the Detroit River became for the first time an international boundary, splitting the settlement in two, with the northern half becoming part of the United States, and the southern half (Windsor, Ontario) remaining with the British Empire. That split rendered Detroit's most important trading partners (Windsor, Montreal, and Quebec City) foreign, which had the potential to upend Detroit's economy. The other shoe dropped four years later in 1800, when Detroit received its first U.S. customs collector, to enforce tariff collection on that foreign trade. In response, Detroiters largely refused to change their trading practices, resorting to what the federal government deemed smuggling (but they viewed simply as the continuation of their century-old economy). In the process, they devised some clever ways of circumventing U.S. customs law, including pulling sleds and sleighs across the frozen river to trade with Windsor in the winter. Because there was no U.S. customs law specifically enumerating winter vehicles as appropriate for international commerce and liable to duties, customs inspectors could do nothing but seethe. The story of Detroit has always been, and in many ways continues to be, a fight for local control. Plus ça change…!

The notes section of Frontier Seaport *indicates that you did research in the archives of several different countries (including the United States, Canada, and France) to study the history of a single settlement. How did you navigate the challenges of integrating such a diverse set of resources into a coherent narrative?*

Early in the research, I jolted myself a bit by wondering, "Of all the paper that was generated in or about Detroit from 1701 to 1837, what percentage of it survived? And of that, what percentage is in this particular archive? And of that, what percentage am I consulting? And of that, what percentage am I using and citing?" To augment that final, undoubtedly small number, I probably looked at more than was strictly necessary, but I like the detective work of history, so I kept going, looking at just about every type of primary source I could find: business records, customs and port papers, court cases, newspapers, maps and prints, material culture, travel narratives, and personal and commercial correspondence.

As historians who work with correspondence can attest, one of the challenges lies in simply finding the various sides (or fragments of the various sides) of the epistolary conversations. Invariably, if they have survived, they are housed at different institutions, and, in this project's case, often in different countries. That was one of its pleasures—although it sometimes meant waiting for months or years before finding out more about a particular story. The pace could be very eighteenth century. As I went along, I did organize the materials I found by topic and personage, which gave me a rough, running sense of what I had and how I might use it. But even that early organization was deliberately minimal. I am a firm believer in not going into the archives with too fixed an idea of what to consult and what to do with it. I prefer to let the sources seek me out and draw me in. It makes for richer and more interesting subject matter that way.

When I returned from the archives and tried to make sense of all that I had found, the sources began to coalesce around certain tensions (frontier versus Atlantic, imperial versus local, and continuity versus change) and also around certain topics. I decided to have each chapter explore each of those three tensions within a particular topic, whether the fur trade, Atlantic merchandise, moccasins, political localisms, the Great Fire, or smuggling. Those topics, which proceed roughly chronologically, necessarily make use of different kinds of sources, which gave rise to unexpected challenges.

Detroit endured five regime changes in a little over a century. It was founded by the French in 1701, gained by the British in 1760, relinquished to the United States in 1796, lost to the British in 1812, and then returned to the United States in 1813. Travel narratives written in the American era turned out to be one of the most compelling sources for confirming that Detroit was awash in transnational merchandise. The tourists had expected to feel some culture shock upon their arrival in town, both because of Detroit's "foreign" past and also its success in commodifying frontier goods like moccasins. To their astonishment, many instead found a considerable degree of material parity between the East Coast and the frontier, writing not only of the merchandise, but also of their delight, relief, and in some cases alarm at discovering it so far from the seaboard. But although it was news to these latecomer travelers, Detroit had in fact been flooded with the goods of empire from its founding. This made finding other, earlier sources (including eighteenth-century French and British merchants' records and correspondence) critical for documenting just how long-standing a tradition Detroit's access to transnational merchandise was by the time the American tourists finally sat up and took notice of it.

It has become a staple of recent conferences in early American history, it seems, to engage in discussions about the relative values of Atlantic and continental approaches to the history of eastern North America. At first glance, Detroit seems more naturally situated for analysis from a continental perspective, so what drew you to think of Detroit in terms of the Atlantic world?

It was a case of art imitating life. While I was in graduate school at the University of Michigan, doing coursework on the traditionally defined Atlantic world, I was also curating at a local history museum. For background material, I read the continental fur trade histories that have shaped our interpretation of colonial Detroit for more than a century. I found myself wondering if, akin to what I had been reading in the classroom, an Atlantic argument could be made for Detroit. Despite my curiosity (and a robust primary source base—the Detroit Public Library, home to the Burton Historical Collection—is in particular an underutilized archive), I had already committed myself to a completely different dissertation topic and was wary of abandoning it for what I was afraid might be a whim.

Then, in an unexpectedly fortuitous turn of events, I came down with West Nile

virus. While out of commission, I had a fever dream about the Detroit project and woke up determined to change topics. It was absolutely the right decision—although I am sure that my strange epiphany must have sounded quite worrisome to my dissertation advisors!

I hope that one of the things that this project achieves is to join the ranks of books that have encouraged us to rethink the artificial confines of the Atlantic world—as a step perhaps toward doing away with that model altogether. The continental-versus-Atlantic debate in many ways is more about historiography than history. As this project taught me, in the long eighteenth century, people, goods, technologies, and ideas, not to mention germs, animals, and other kinds of travelers, regularly moved back and forth between the interior and the seaboard without construing them as separate, unrelated, and fundamentally irreconcilable spaces. We should be following their lead.

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