

Money-Value Definitions of Economic Classes in Colonial Connecticut, 1700-1776

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I

An increasingly large number of historians are focusing their attention on economic classes in the American Colonies. Earlier, many historians used class terminology such as "wealthy," "middle," or "poor" when talking about the colonies but never defined these classes with any precision. The recent scholarship usually defines economic classes within a short time period or defines them not in money values but in relation to one another.¹ Many historians would find it very useful to have money-value definitions of percentages of the population in various regions at differing times. A historian dealing with an individual or a large group might wish to know where his subject(s) ranked economically in relation to the rest of society. A historian wishing to trace the mobility of successive generations of the same family might wish to see if sons and grandsons improved their relative economic standing. A need exists for precise definitions in money-values of economic classes. The lists that accompany this article attempt partially to fulfill this need by defining economic classes in Connecticut between 1700 and 1776.²

Any comprehensive definition of Connecticut's classes must deal with two basic problems. Firstly, no definition can possibly be accurate for all seventy-six years of the colonial eighteenth century. Societies as a whole grow wealthier or poorer in seventy-six years, economic classes change their relationships to one another, and sometimes currencies are changed and become inflated or deflated. To deal with these problems, the period has been sub-divided into three twenty-year periods, 1700 to 1720, 1720 to 1740, and 1740 to 1760, and one sixteen-year period, 1760 to 1776. The smaller intervals minimize the effects of inflation and changing economic conditions and permit all money values to be assigned a common currency.

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¹ The two most well-known recent works that deal with economic classes in Colonial New England are Jackson Turner MAIN, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965), and Alice Hanson JONES, "Wealth Estimates for the New England Colonies about 1770," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXII (March, 1972), and her long article, "Wealth Estimates for the American Middle Colonies, 1774," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, XVIII (July, 1970), 1-172.

² I addressed myself to this question previously in an exploratory article, "Probate Inventories as Sources of Economic History in Eighteenth Century Connecticut," *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, 37 (January, 1972), 1-9.

The second major problem is that Connecticut typically had a varied pattern of regional economies. An estate of £500 might be in the top 10 per cent of a small town's economy, but only be in the top 30 per cent of a large town's economy, and might even be in a different percentile in an urban area. No one definition would be accurate for all of the different types of communities. To overcome this, different definitions will be provided for three different types of communities and also for the colony as a whole.

The actual data for the lists of definitions come from probate inventories of real and personal estates. The probate inventories of fifty different adult white men were sampled at random for each interval and for each geographical location. Difference of means tests, performed on samples of fifty drawn from the same grouping, showed a negligible deviation which means that fifty is an accurate sample of the whole.³ Only the assets in each inventory were considered, for in Connecticut, unlike Massachusetts, liabilities were rarely listed in the same probate documents.

It is clear that not all Connecticut men had probate inventories taken of their estates. Kenneth Lockridge estimated that about 40 per cent of the adult white males were inventoried while Alice Jones found the number to be somewhat less, 32.7 per cent.⁴ It is a safe assumption that the vast majority of those not inventoried fell in the lower two-thirds of the economic ladder. However, the inventories that are extant are by no means solely the records of the élite. Many people we know to have been wealthy left no inventories while conversely many men with just a hand tool and the clothes on their backs had these meagre possessions carefully inventoried by the probate courts. The missing 60 per cent cannot be explained by the assumption that they had nothing worth inventorying. Historians know from qualitative evidence that the poor landless population of eighteenth-century New England never approached 60 per cent. Probably, the time of the year, the number of heirs, the distance from the courthouse, and other extraneous factors determined whether or not an inventory was taken. At any rate, the definitions provided in this article claim to be accurate only for those people who were included in the probating process. The definitions would differ slightly from those one might compile for the general population because the men found in the probate records would usually be older than the general population.

³ To establish the validity of the sample, two samples of 50 inventories each were drawn from the same area and interval. The two samples were compared at the 5th, 15th, 35th, and 45th points in their distributions and each compared pair of points differed by less than 5 percent. This means that the sample is an accurate reflection of the whole, with a 5 percent error rate.

⁴ Kenneth LOCKRIDGE, "A Communication," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXV (July, 1968), 16, Jones. "Wealth Estimates for the New England Colonies," 116.

Hence, these definitions should only be used for comparisons with men's worth as found in probate records and not with other data such as tax lists.

The three types of communities represented in the definitions are urban centres founded early in Connecticut's colonial history, middle-sized towns founded late in the seventeenth century, and frontier towns founded in the late 1730's and early 1740's. Hartford, the provincial capital, one of Connecticut's first towns, and a thriving centre with a population of 5,031 in 1774, served as the sample area for urban communities.⁵ Danbury, Waterbury, and Windham, three geographically separated towns all of which were settled in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and which had populations ranging from 2,700 to 3,400 in the 1774 census, served as the sample areas for the middle-sized communities. The Litchfield County towns of Canaan, Kent, Salisbury, and Sharon, all of which were founded from 1739 through 1741 and which had populations in 1774 that ranged from 1,550 to 1,900, served as the sample areas for frontier communities settled late. For the colony as a whole, random samples were taken from the alphabetical index to the probate records which covers the entire colony.

II

Understanding New England currency for the eighteenth century, which is necessary for the present definitions, can be a complicated problem for historians. Connecticut first issued currency,⁶ later called Old Tenor, in 1709 which was issued at a par value with pound sterling and which was called "Country Pay" at the time of its issue.⁷ Country Pay became devalued almost at once, though not drastically until the late 1730's. All probate inventories were reckoned in Country Pay. In an effort to halt the serious inflation gripping all of New England in the 1740's, Connecticut issued another currency between 1744 and 1746 called New Tenor, and Country Pay became Old Tenor.⁸ New Tenor notes were not used to assess estates and through 1755 Old Tenor was the currency used in inventories. In 1751, however, the colony started retiring its Old and New Tenor issues and after 1755 almost all inventories were reckoned in Lawful Money which was an accounting unit at which Old and New Tenor notes were to be exchanged for Sterling. At first, theoretically, Lawful Money was equal to sterling but as an accounting unit it immediately

⁵ Populations for all of the towns come from the census of 1774 in J. Hammond TRUMBULL and Charles HOADLEY (eds.), *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut* (15 vols., Hartford, 1850-1890), XIV, 1774, 486-490.

⁶ See especially Henry BRONSON, "Historical Account of Connecticut Currency," *New Haven Colony Historical Society Papers*, Vol. I (New Haven, 1865), 1-192, and Lawrence Henry GIPSON, *Connecticut Taxation, 1750-1775* (New Haven, 1933).

⁷ BRONSON, "Historical Account," 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56, 65.

slipped below sterling and was worth slightly less.⁹ Lawful Money was used in probate inventories through 1776.

The lists of definitions are computed in Old Tenor for the periods 1701 to 1720, 1721 to 1740, and 1741 to 1760, and in Lawful Money for the period 1761 to 1776. Any Connecticut estate in the first two twenty-year periods, 1701 to 1720 and 1721 to 1740, will also be calculated in Old Tenor and can easily be compared with the definitions. A Connecticut estate after 1760 was almost always calculated in Lawful Money. However, a few were valued in Sterling and, if so, can be converted into Lawful Money at an 11 LM = 8 S ratio. A very few estates after 1760 were probated in Old Tenor and, if so, can be converted to Lawful Money by dividing by 7.5.¹⁰

The currency during the monetarily confusing period 1740 to 1760 requires some special explanation. In general, inventories were reckoned in Old Tenor through 1755 and in Lawful Money after 1755. However, Old Tenor was devalued so rapidly between 1750 and 1751 that adjustments have to be made for changes in its value or the lists of definitions will not be comparing the same currency values. The lists of definitions for the period 1740 to 1760 were all calculated in the value of Old Tenor as it was stabilized in the period from 1751 through 1755. Estates after 1755 will be reckoned in Lawful Money and can be converted into the Old Tenor rates used in the definitions by multiplying by 7.6. Estates between 1740 and 1751 were reckoned in a rapidly depreciating Old Tenor that can be converted into the Old Tenor rate used by use of the following Table.

<i>Estates in Years</i>	<i>Multiply Old Tenor Values By</i> ¹¹
1740-1744	1.46
1745-1746	1.39
1747	1.36
1748	1.25
1749-1750	1.15

The following lists of class definitions can be valuable working tools for historians.¹² For convenience they have been arranged in the most widely used statistical breakdown of class structures.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹² My similar attempts at defining economic classes in New Hampshire and Massachusetts appear in "Defining Economic Classes in Colonial New Hampshire, 1700-1770," *Historical New Hampshire*, XXVIII (Spring, 1973), 53-62, and "Defining Economic Classes in Colonial Massachusetts, 1700-1776," *Proceedings of The American Antiquarian Society*, 88, Part 2 (1974), 251-259. In "Probate Inventories as A source for Economic History in Eighteenth Century Connecticut," I have listed all two hundred of the inventories used for the colony as a whole. The class-definitions used in that article and the present one will be slightly different because I used different statistical cut-off points and did not adjust for the rapid inflation in the 1741 to 1760 period in the former article as I have in this present one.

Class I. Wealthy.	91st percentile and above.
Class II. Prosperous.	71st percentile through 90th.
Class III. Middle.	31st percentile through 70th.
Class IV. Lower.	11th percentile through 30th.
Class V. Poor.	0 through 10th percentile.

Table I: CLASS DEFINITIONS 1701-1720

Note: All estates between 1700 and 1760 reckoned in Connecticut Old Tenor.

Hartford

Class I. Wealthy.	91st percentile and above, £1,119 and above.
Class II. Prosperous.	71st percentile through 90th, £321 through £1,118.
Class III. Middle.	31st percentile through 70th, £79 through £320.
Class IV. Lower.	11th percentile through 30th, £19 through £78.
Class V. Poor.	0 through 10th percentile, 0 through £18.

Danbury, Waterbury, Windham

Class I.	£297 and above.
Class II.	£217 through £296.
Class III.	£119 through £216.
Class IV.	£62 through £118.
Class V.	0 through £61.

Colony at Large

Class I.	£916 and above.
Class II.	£256 through £915.
Class III.	£82 through £255.
Class IV.	£14 through £81.
Class V.	0 through £13.

Table II: CLASS DEFINITIONS 1721-1740

Hartford

Class I.	£2,206 and above.
Class II.	£961 through £2,205.
Class III.	£253 through £960.
Class IV.	£38 through £252.
Class V.	0 through £37.

Danbury, Waterbury, Windham

Class I.	£1,401 and above.
Class II.	£757 through £1,400.
Class III.	£203 through £756.
Class IV.	£69 through £202.
Class V.	0 through £68.

Colony at Large

Class I,	£1,083 and above.
Class II,	£592 through £1,082.
Class III,	£161 through £591.
Class IV,	£51 through £160.
Class V,	0 through £50.

Table III: CLASS DEFINITIONS 1741-1760

Hartford

Class I,	£4,584 and above.
Class II,	£2,398 through £4,583.
Class III,	£310 through £2,397.
Class IV,	£61 through £309.
Class V,	0 through £60.

Danbury, Waterbury, Windham

Class I,	£3,470 and above.
Class II,	£1,612 through £3,469.
Class III,	£577 through £1,611.
Class IV,	£150 through £576.
Class V,	0 through £149.

Litchfield County Towns

Class I,	£2,464 and above.
Class II,	£1,748 through £2,463.
Class III,	£278 through £1,747.
Class IV,	£131 through £277.
Class V,	0 through £130.

Colony at Large

Class I,	£3,231 and above.
Class II,	£1,391 through £3,230.
Class III,	£288 through £1,390.
Class IV,	£80 through £287.
Class V,	0 through £79.

Table IV: CLASS DEFINITIONS 1761-1776

Note: All estates between 1761 and 1776 in Connecticut Lawful Money.

Hartford

Class I,	£1,608 and above.
Class II,	£626 through £1,607.
Class III,	£160 through £625.
Class IV,	£26 through £159.
Class V,	0 through £ 25.

Danbury, Waterbury, Windham

Class I,	£790 and above.
Class II,	£448 through £789.
Class III,	£119 through 447.
Class IV,	£39 through £118.
Class V,	0 through £38.

Litchfield County Towns

Class I,	£751 and above.
Class II,	£429 through £756.
Class III,	£82 through £428.
Class IV,	£32 through £81.
Class V,	0 through £31.

Colony at Large

Class I,	£963 and above.
Class II,	£460 through £962.
Class III,	£145 through £459.
Class IV,	£37 through £144.
Class V,	0 through £36.