

## Out of the Loop: An Analysis of Liverpool's Isolation From the Broader Atlantic World During the American Revolution, Based on the Diary of Simeon Perkins

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Simeon Perkins (1735-1812) lived through some of the most tumultuous and consequential events of the past five hundred years, namely those of the American Revolution. Living in the small town of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, Perkins exhibited a keen interest in these developments and took pains to record in his diary whatever scraps of foreign intelligence he received. A man of considerable standing who interacted with visitors from other ports on an almost daily basis, Perkins would have had better access to information than practically anyone else in Liverpool. Accordingly, his diary presents an excellent case study of the degree to which eighteenth-century Nova Scotians, at least those living in small coastal settlements like Liverpool, would have been able to inform themselves accurately of distant events. The paucity of information that Perkins received from abroad and the high incidence of erroneous information in his diary suggest that he and his contemporaries would have had, at best, a limited and ambiguous conception of the world beyond the horizon.

Born in Norwich, Connecticut in February 1735, Simeon Perkins was the fourth of sixteen children born to Jacob Perkins and Jemima Leonard. After spending the early years of his life in New England, Perkins moved to the recently founded town of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, in May 1762 as part of the New England Planter migration. He opened a store and quickly became in-

volved in a number of other commercial interests. Of particular note were his involvement in the local shipbuilding industry and his exchange of fish, lumber, and other commodities with such distant markets as the West Indies, the Thirteen Colonies, Newfoundland, and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

These enterprises helped Perkins to achieve status within the community, and he soon emerged as one of Liverpool's most prominent men. In January, 1764, Perkins was appointed Justice of the Peace and Justice of the Inferior Court, positions he would hold for the ensuing forty-six years. His involvement in public life continued to grow in 1770, when he was chosen Proprietors' Clerk and County Treasurer, both positions that he filled until 1802, as well as Town Clerk, a position that he held until his death in 1812. He was also appointed Judge of Probates for Queen's County in June, 1777, an office which he held until his resignation in 1807, and served as Deputy Registrar of the Vice Admiralty Court from 1780 to 1790. Additionally, Perkins represented Queens County in the colonial government from 1765 to 1799, with the exception of the years 1768 and 1769.

Another facet of Perkins's leadership in the Liverpool community was his involvement with the local militia. Serving as lieutenant-colonel of the county militia from 1772 to 1793 and colonel commandant from 1793 to 1807, Perkins played a leading role in coordinating the town's defense during some of its most perilous years. With the onset of the American Revolution in 1775, Liverpool came under the constant threat of attack by American privateers. The provincial government's reluctance to commit to Liverpool's defence compounded this danger, forcing the town to rely upon a small, local garrison for protection against increasingly frequent privateer incursions. Liverpool was thus in many ways a sitting duck, and consequently suffered heavy losses, particularly during the early years of the revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Bruce Ferguson, "Simeon Perkins," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, accessed November 1, 2007 <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioID=36724&query=simeon%20AND%20perkins>>

This terror was somewhat mitigated midway through the war, when the Halifax authorities began sending reinforcements to Liverpool and citizens began outfitting privateers of their own—both developments to which Perkins was central. In 1779, Perkins joined with a group of Liverpool merchants to commission the town's first privateer, the *Lucy*. This marked the beginning of a counterattack against American privateers, which was first pursued as a defensive measure and later as a source of profit, that continued with fluctuating fortune until the conclusion of peace in 1803.<sup>2</sup> Of the six privateers that went out from Liverpool between 1799 and 1801, Perkins had an interest in five. Some of these ventures were lucrative, while others were costly, and it was this volatility that ultimately drove Perkins and his associates to abandon privateering in 1801.<sup>3</sup>

While Perkins was a leading figure in the Liverpool community, what made him truly significant was the fact that he took the time to record diligently the details of his daily existence in a diary. Spanning from 29 May 1766 to 13 April 1812, his diary is complete, except for the period from 22 November 1767 to 15 June 1769, when he returned to Connecticut; the year 1771, during which he recorded no entries; and the period from 5 March 1806 to 29 November 1809, the record of which has been lost.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas many diaries are intimate and introspective, Perkins's is remarkably terse and dispassionate. Rather than describing his own emotions or opinions, Perkins instead devotes the bulk of the diary to such varied topics as judicial proceedings, medicine, religious trends, shipping intelligence, and trade with far-off ports. As D.C. Harvey notes, "This is no ordinary diary concerned with personal affairs and private business alone; but rather a sort of unofficial journal or unpublished newspaper, which reflects through the eyes of one man the way of life and the

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<sup>2</sup> D.C. Harvey, ed., *The Diary of Simeon Perkins: 1780-1789* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1958), xli.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, "Simeon Perkins."

vicissitudes of an entire community, and its contacts with the wider world beyond the horizon." Indeed, Perkins's diary lends itself to numerous types of analyses capable of shedding considerable light on life in Liverpool during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In particular, the way in which Perkins informed himself of developments that took place on far-off shores and seas presents an interesting field of inquiry. The diary shows that Perkins had a keen interest in foreign events and sought to learn as much about them as he could. It also shows that he faced significant challenges in doing so. Geographically and culturally isolated in the small town of Liverpool, Perkins had no means to obtain regular, reliable updates from abroad.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he was forced to piece together whatever scraps of information he could from the sources that were available to him, namely second-hand oral news accounts and newspapers printed in larger ports.

Further complicating matters was the fact that a significant proportion of the news Perkins received was distorted, contradictory, or flat-out wrong. Given that Perkins had no reliable means of assessing this information's veracity, it would have been virtually impossible for him to have achieved a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the world beyond Nova Scotia. Consequently, as John Bartlet Brebner observes, Perkins and his contemporaries in Nova Scotia almost certainly spent the years of the Revolutionary War in a state of "ill-informed and uneasy contemplation of the noisy progress of Anglo-American conflicts to their violent conclusion."<sup>6</sup> The deficiencies in the news Perkins received corroborate the traditional view of eighteenth-century Nova Scotia as a marginal, isolated colony that historians such as Brebner and George Rawlyk have advanced.

Given his isolation in Liverpool, Perkins had limited access to foreign intelligence—a reality evidenced by the fact that he re-

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<sup>5</sup> John Barlet Brebner, *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia: A Marginal Colony During the Revolutionary Years* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1969), 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

cords receiving a mere 110 foreign news accounts between 1774 and 1783. He therefore had to rely on whatever information was available to him. This meant that the overwhelming majority of the updates he received from abroad came via either second-hand oral accounts or print accounts published in larger centres. In assessing information from these two types of sources, it becomes clear that while information of the former type was easier to come by, the latter type was significantly more accurate. However, as *Table 1* in the appendix illustrates, what is perhaps most striking in this comparison is not the disparity between the accuracy of print sources and that of oral accounts, but rather the degree of their shared inaccuracy.

Similarly, what stands out in a comparison of the news accounts Perkins received from various ports is not a significant difference in their respective accuracies, but rather their collective unreliability. As *Table 2* in the appendix demonstrates, no less than twenty percent of the information Perkins received from any given port or group of ports was erroneous. While some ports had even higher incidences of erroneous information—as high as forty-two percent—no port or group of ports provided accurate information consistently enough to warrant privileging it as a more reliable source of foreign intelligence than the others.

A year-by-year comparison of the news accounts Perkins records during the Revolutionary War period shows that while the proportion of erroneous information he received varied from one year to another, it remained consistently high throughout the war. Indeed, as *Table 3* in the appendix shows, no less than twenty-seven percent of the news Perkins received in a given year (from both oral and print sources) has since been proven inaccurate. Therefore, we can conclude that misinformation was as persistent as it was pervasive during this period.<sup>7</sup>

Having established the prevalence of misinformation in

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<sup>7</sup> Table 3 only charts foreign news accounts with stated ports of origin; therefore, it only represents 96 of the 110 accounts examined.

Perkins's diary, let us now turn to a qualitative analysis of the types of misinformation he records receiving. This sort of analysis is useful not only because it illustrates the various sorts of faulty intelligence that were passed along to Perkins, but also because it conveys a sense of how he must have struggled to differentiate fact from fiction as he sought to keep abreast of foreign events.

One of the most common characteristics of the false intelligence Perkins received was distortion. In many cases, distorted news was based on actual events but failed to reflect them accurately. In particular, casualty figures were often skewed. For example, on 11 June 1775, Perkins records learning of a battle on Noodle's Island during which "200 Regulars [were] killed and a few of the Provincialists wounded."<sup>8</sup> While such an action did take place, a mere two regulars died in conflict, or one-hundredth of the figure Perkins was led to believe.<sup>9</sup> The account of the Battle of Monmouth that Perkins received on 11 August 1778 is similarly flawed. While casualties were roughly equal on both the British and American sides, Perkins writes, "The News from the Army at New York is, that there has been an Engagement in the Jerseys, near Freehold Court House, that the Royal Army routed the Americans, and Killed Great Numbers, with a Small Loss."<sup>10</sup> Taken at face value, these sorts of reports would have fundamentally warped Perkins's conception of the war's progress.

Further compromising Perkins's ability to obtain an accurate understanding of foreign developments were the numerous sets of conflicting reports that he records receiving. On 27 June 1775, Perkins writes that he learned of an engagement between the King's troops and the Provincialists that resulted in the deaths of 300 provincials and 140 British soldiers.<sup>11</sup> The next day, however,

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<sup>8</sup> Harold A. Innis, ed., *The Diary of Simeon Perkins: 1766-1780* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1948), 94.

<sup>9</sup> Allen French, *The First Year of the American Revolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 190.

<sup>10</sup> Inniss, *The Diary*, 211.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

he receives a somewhat different account from a Captain White of Plymouth, who reported that 398 provincials had been buried.<sup>12</sup> Then, on July 4, Perkins writes that a group of men from Plymouth brought further news of the engagement, and notes, "The reports of numbers killed differ essentially."<sup>13</sup> Not only would these conflicting reports have confused Perkins, but they also failed to reflect the true result of the battle, as the death toll was actually closer to 140 provincials and 226 of the King's troops—an altogether different outcome than that which Perkins would have conceived based on the intelligence passed on to him.<sup>14</sup> While certainly misleading, these sorts of conflicting, erroneous accounts were by no means unique or aberrant in Perkins's diary.

Perkins's references to news of the Battle of Long Island provide another useful illustration of the way in which inconsistent news accounts would have obscured his understanding of foreign events. On 21 September 1776, Perkins writes that he received news that "the King's troops had landed upon Long Island, and killed eight thousand of the Americans, with the loss of 150 men, and that they drove them like sheep."<sup>15</sup> Two days later, he records receiving a different account, one supposedly originating from American military headquarters, which held that "5000 were killed, and 3000 taken prisoners, 800 drove in the sea and drowned."<sup>16</sup> As if reconciling these two versions of the battle were not confusing enough, Perkins notes reading an account in a Halifax newspaper on September 29 that put the American death toll at somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000.<sup>17</sup> Worse yet, none of these three divergent accounts provided an accurate description of the battle, as the British suffered approximately 400 casualties, while

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>14</sup> French, *First Year*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Inis, *The Diary*, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 130-1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 132.

the American total was around 2,000.<sup>18</sup>

The difficulties that conflicting news accounts posed are further demonstrated by the different accounts of an engagement between the Americans and the British at Machias that Perkins received in 1777. On August 26, he records learning that "the fort at Machias is taken and some of the Town burnt."<sup>19</sup> However, a mere week later, on September 2, he writes that "A schooner from Cape Risue [?] bring news that the Machias people had drove off the King's ships, and done them some damage."<sup>20</sup> While this second account is historically accurate (Fort O'Brien at Machias did withstand a British siege in 1777), Perkins does not seem able to differentiate definitively between the false and the factual, as he questions neither of these contradictory reports.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore reasonable to conclude that he was at least somewhat confused by this conflicting intelligence.

Perkins's references to General Howe's army's purported defeat in July, 1777 offer still more proof of the confusion war rumours could cause. On July 20, Perkins writes, "We have a report that came from another privateer, lately from New England, that General Howe has been defeated, and wounded, and taken prisoner."<sup>22</sup> Three days later, he records that a Captain Gerrish of Newbury "contradicts the report that came from the privateer that General How was wounded and taken prisoner, and his army defeated, but says that General Prescott, with a party of men, was made prisoners."<sup>23</sup> While this second account is historically accurate (Prescott had been captured in July, 1777, near Newport, Rhode Island), Perkins had no effective means of corroborating either of these reports.<sup>24</sup> Even if he had access to more second-

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Mayo Boatner III, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York: McKay, 1966), 654.

<sup>19</sup> Innis, *The Diary*, 163.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Boatner, *Encyclopedia*, 383.

<sup>22</sup> Innis, *The Diary*, 159.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>24</sup> Boatner, *Encyclopedia*, 886.



hand information, its reliability would have been equally dubious, so he still would have been left to make his own determination of which account was more plausible—a fact that hardly inspires confidence in his grasp of far-off developments.

The inconsistent accounts of the 1780 Gordon Riots that Perkins describes provide additional evidence that contradictory information impeded his ability to understand foreign events accurately. On August 20, Perkins notes learning of an insurrection in the city of London, during which there was “Said to be a mobb [sic] of 30 thousand; that they pulled down Lord North’s House; that the guards Dispersed them & Killed—Some say 700, others say 7000.”<sup>25</sup> Two days later, he notes receiving word from a Mr. McDonald of Lunenburg that “about 800 were Killed” during the uprising.<sup>26</sup> Whether these inconsistent accounts would have led Perkins to believe the death toll was closer to 700 or 7000 matters little. Since less than 300 rioters were actually killed, we can conclude that, regardless of which account Perkins chose to believe, he would have critically misunderstood these events.<sup>27</sup>

Perkins’s difficulty in conceiving the 1782 Battle of the Saintes off Martinique likewise attests to the limitations of second-hand information. On April 18, Perkins writes:

Elkenah Freeman from Halifax brings very Grand News, if True, viz: Admiral Rodney coming out from England to the West Indies with 14 sail of the Line, fell in with a Reinforcement Coming from France to the French Fleet in the West Indies, and Captured Nine Sail of Line of Battle Ships and 35 Transports; and that the English Fleet is 45 Sail of the Line. They have blocked the French Fleet into Martinique, & have 17 Sail of the Line to Cruise. This will determine the fate of the war for this Summer in America.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Harvey, *The Diary*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Boatner, *Encyclopedia*, 440.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey, *The Diary*, 129.

However, two days later, Perkins finds this news contradicted by a Captain Elisha Hopkins of Halifax, who “only heard of Nine Sail of transports being taken, and that there is a reinforcement of twenty Sail of French Line of Battle Ships in the West Indies.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, neither one of these conflicting reports reflected the battle’s true course of events accurately, as Rodney’s fleet of 36 ships-of-the-line defeated a French fleet numbering 33 ships-of-the-line decisively off Martinique between 9 April and 12 April 1782.<sup>30</sup> The prevalence of this sort of misinformation in Perkin’s diary throughout the war years suggests that his understanding of foreign events must have been at least somewhat skewed by the false intelligence he received.

Even the news Perkins received of such a major development as the cessation of hostilities between America and Britain was flawed. On 5 May 1783, he notes speaking with a Captain Humphrey, who believed a cessation of hostilities had begun on March 3, while the crew of a sloop recently arrived from New York said it had taken place on April 3.<sup>31</sup> Further confusing Perkins was a Mr. Hussey of Halifax, who informed Perkins on May 8 that the truce had come into effect on March 3.<sup>32</sup> Whichever of these reports Perkins chose to believe, he would have been mistaken, as a formal cessation of hostilities between America and Britain was not actually proclaimed until 11 April 1783.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to having to discern between the various conflicting news accounts he received, Perkins was also bombarded by a stream of false but believable misinformation that would have further hindered his ability to accurately understand foreign

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> George Hagerman, “Naval Battles of the Saintes,” *Military History* 19 (2002), 30-31.

<sup>31</sup> Harvey, *The Diary*, 185.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>33</sup> John R. Alden, *A History of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 478.

events. Indeed, Perkins's diary describes several military developments that simply never took place. For example, on 19 April 1776, Perkins writes, "I hear Mr. Bradbury brings news that Quebec is taken by scaling the walls on the 5th of March. That the Americans lost 700 men."<sup>34</sup> While this rumour may have seemed plausible, it had absolutely no factual basis whatsoever. Nor, for that matter, did the news that Perkins received on 15 November 1776, when he recorded hearing "that there is some invasion in this province by the New England people, and that Lieut. Gov. Francklin is taken prisoner."<sup>35</sup> Yet another example of this sort of misinformation is provided by his diary entry for 30 March 1778, in which he records learning "That General Howe and his army were prisoners, and that Barracks were preparing in Boston."<sup>36</sup> Again, this rumour was unfounded. However, since Perkins lacked a reliable means of either confirming or discrediting any of these rumours, it is easy to see how these sorts of false reports would have at least slightly obscured his understanding of the conflict's progress.

In this same way, a number of rumours describing false diplomatic and political developments would have further undermined Perkin's ability to achieve an accurate understanding of events abroad. For instance, on 23 August 1778, Perkins notes that he received "no material News, except a Report that the Parliament is about to come into a resolution of suspending Hostilitys [sic] till next June."<sup>37</sup> While such news would certainly have been welcome to Perkins and his war-weary contemporaries, it was simply untrue. Likewise, Perkins's diary entry for 26 May 1779 describes a false report that he received from the crew of a London ship, which claimed that the French were exhausted and had sued for peace.<sup>38</sup> An additional illustration of this sort of misinformation is found in Perkins's entry for 31 October 1779, where he de-

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<sup>34</sup> Innis, *The Diary*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

scribes a report that “the inhabitants of Boston are in Great Confusion, Killing the French by mobbing, etc. many of them in jail for it.”<sup>39</sup> Again, there was no factual basis for this rumour, but nor was there any dependable way for Perkins to discern its falsehood. Accordingly, it seems implausible that Perkins’s conception of foreign diplomatic and political developments would not have been at least somewhat distorted by these sorts of erroneous reports.

Having examined some of the types of misinformation that Perkins received during the years of the American Revolution, it is clear that he not only received little foreign intelligence, but also that much of the intelligence he did receive would have been erroneous. This is not to say that all of this intelligence was faulty, for it was not. In fact, much of this information was remarkably accurate and would have given Perkins a reasonable grasp of the developments it described. However, given how infrequently he received updates from abroad—during four of the ten years examined, he records a mere nine foreign news accounts per year—and given that such a high proportion of this information was wrong, we should conclude that Perkins and his contemporaries must have had but a limited conception of the world beyond Nova Scotia and that this conception was at least somewhat skewed by false intelligence. In other words, eighteenth-century Nova Scotians would have had, at best, a vague understanding of the world beyond the horizon.

Considering the terse character of Perkins’s diary entries, it is difficult to know exactly how much false intelligence he actually believed or how he attempted to reconcile the obvious discrepancies between the various conflicting news accounts he received. Nonetheless, the rare flashes of insight he does provide reveal a good deal about how much credence he put in indirect information. For instance, on 20 September 1782, when Perkins hears a report that a schooner carrying a group of escaped British prisoners was intercepted by a British Man of War and the prisoners

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

taken to England, he notes, "This Intelligence is pleasing, if it may be relied on, but So many mistakes are passing in these times, I dare not make much dependence upon it, but desire to wait with patience & pray God to fit me for whatever the event may be."<sup>40</sup> This reluctance to accept indirect news at face value is similarly demonstrated by his entry for 20 April 1783, where he records hearing news of an Anglo-American truce but is cautious not to put too much stock in it, noting, "We waite Impatiently to hear the News Direct from England."<sup>41</sup> These sorts of entries indicate that Perkins was aware of the deficiencies of second-hand information and was accordingly cautious in evaluating the news he received.

Without recourse to an authoritative source of information, the only way Perkins could attempt to assess the veracity of the news he received was by comparing it with other intelligence. For example, on 27 May 1777, he notes an account from a Captain Webb of Halifax, who reported that "an action has happened at Danbury, in Connecticut, between the King's troops, and the Provincials, that the King's troops destroyed a large magazine of provisions, and other stores...and that General Worster was killed."<sup>42</sup> The next day, Perkins records receiving a Malachy Salter, also of Halifax, who "confirms ye story of the engagement."<sup>43</sup> Since these accounts proved truthful, Perkins was correct in accepting them as fact.<sup>44</sup> He was likewise correct in treating an account of Lord Cornwallis's capitulation at Yorktown that he received on 19 December 1781 as "confirmation" of a similar report that he received three days earlier.<sup>45</sup> This approach was effective, for not one of the eight "confirmations" Perkins describes during the period examined proved incorrect.<sup>46</sup> However, because he had such limited access

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<sup>40</sup> Harvey, *The Diary*, 157.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Boatner, *Encyclopedia*, 315.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1246; Harvey, *The Diary*, 104-5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 153-154, 175; Innis, *The Diary*, 36, 94, 105, 108, 184.

to foreign intelligence, Perkins could only corroborate a small fraction of the news accounts he received; he would have been forced to use his own judgment to determine the veracity of the rest.

An assessment of the foreign intelligence Perkins received during the years of the American Revolution shows that he had limited access to information from abroad and that a significant proportion of the information he did receive was erroneous. Consequently, it would have been virtually impossible for him to have obtained a firm grasp of foreign developments or for him to have had confidence in the majority of the inferences he drew from the intelligence he received. Given that practically no one in the Liverpool community would have had better access to information than Perkins, his contemporaries in Liverpool and other coastal settlements in Nova Scotia would almost certainly have confronted these same difficulties. We can therefore conclude that Nova Scotia was indeed, as Brebner and Rawlyk have maintained, severely marginalized from events in the broader Atlantic World during the eighteenth century.

## Appendix

Table 1:

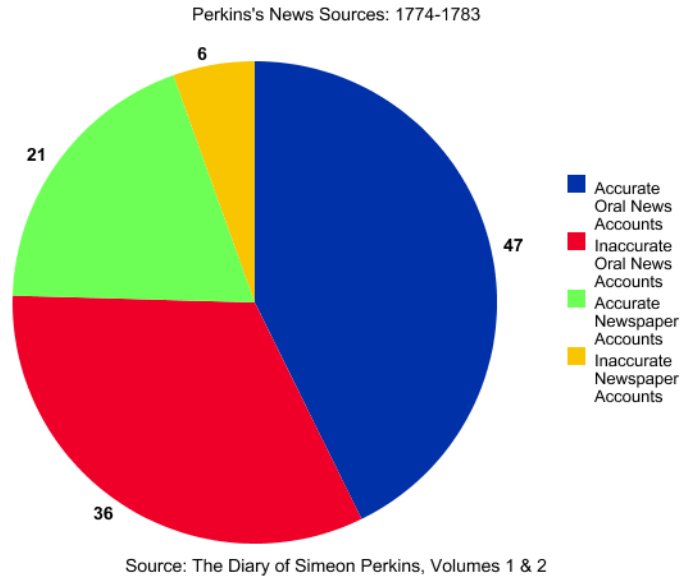


Table 2:

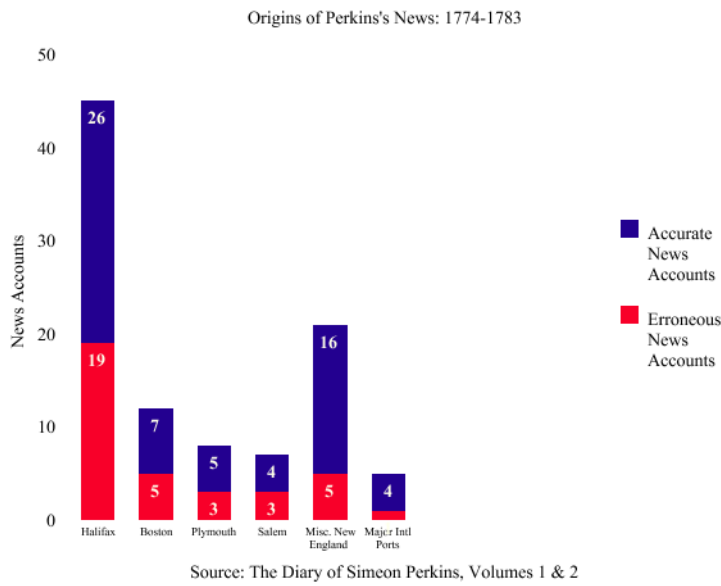


Table 3:

