Mercantile Portland
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Portland (named Falmouth until 1786) had the most fully developed mercantile triangle of land use in Maine in the early nineteenth century (plate 35). A small mercantile triangle had emerged in the strandline village of Falmouth in the thirty years before the American Revolution. The base and sides of the triangle, Thames and King streets, replicated in name and function the equivalent streets of London’s triangle created after the Great Fire of 1666. In 1775, the British destroyed practically all the buildings in the center of Falmouth (plate 18). In a rare instance of urban leapfrogging, there emerged during the period 1784–1787 a new mercantile triangle ten times larger than the pre-disaster one, with the new axes, Exchange (Fitch) Street, 350 yards southeast of the old one on King (India) Street.

Four bands of activity—wholesaling, financial-communications, retailing, and government institutional—emerged on Fore, Exchange, Middle, and Congress streets respectively between 1790 and 1817, and were clearly differentiated by the 1830s. The mercantile base along the waterfront was three-quarters of a mile long and centered on the intersection of the triangle’s axes (Exchange Street), where Central, Long, and Commercial wharves, named in explication of Boston’s axial wharves, attracted merchants and traders dealing in high value “West India” (rum, sugar) and “English” (manufactured) goods. Further out were the wholesalers of bulky goods alongside maritime-related industrial establishments.

The financial-communications district, with its six banks, newspaper offices, printers, auction houses, brokers, insurance agents, and lawyers, stretched from the Post Office (Union Street) and City Exchange along Exchange Street to the Exchange Coffee House and Customs House (Fore Street).

The main locations for the 300 traders on Middle Street were on both sides of the Exchange Street intersection, dominated by “West India goods” stores (imported groceries) in the 1820s and thereafter by stores selling “English goods” (jewelry, apparel, clothing). Further west was the household goods district (crockery, furniture, hardware). Craftsmen in metal and wood in the adjacent streets filled out this district. Near the Market Square were six “Rows” (a continuous line of shops in one building), many selling convenience goods and groceries. Those, together with the market under the City Hall building, proved an effective retail “interceptor” of many country people traveling to the fashionable shopping district.

At the spot of the triangle were the City Hall, Academy, jail, county courthouse, and Old State House; framed by eleven churches in the main middle-class residential area. Four other churches were drawn towards the rise residential area developing around State Street. The white working-class residential areas were back of the waterfront on both sides of the triangle, the black quarter, with its Abyssinian Church, was relegated to the Hancock Street area northeast of the old triangle.

A fifth band of seven hotels emerged on the north side of the Congress-Middle streets area during the prosperity of the 1820s: three (Sargent’s Hotel, City Hotel, Preble Street House) in the “interceptor”; the town’s three major hotels (American House, Cumberland House/United States Hotel, Elm Hotel) in an arc around Market Square; and Casco House (vestibule) near the City Exchange.

By 1844, the triangle was about to burst its seams in the southwest. The alternative adopted was to push the waterfront seawards by reclaiming land and creating a new town. Boston’s Commercial Street (1826–1830) with its “four-story brick commercial buildings with distinctive granite piers and lintels at the street level” was the model for Portland’s Commercial Street (1842) and its fine commercial architecture of the 1850s (plate 45).