On June 7, 1776, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed a resolution to the Continental Congress, sitting that day in the State House in Philadelphia: “that these United Colonies are, and of right, ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connections between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

Inspired by these words, Thomas Jefferson wrote the text of the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, probably quite late in the day.

Once the Declaration was adopted, the Congress authorised that it be printed. John Hancock, a merchant from Boston and president of the Congress, signed the authorised copy. Presumably one or more members of Congress took the authorised copy to the printing shop of John Dunlap, the Congress’s official printer, located at 48 High Street and Market Street, a relative short walk from the State House.

The next day, July 5, some two hundred copies were delivered to John Hancock for appropriate distribution. The text of the Declaration of Independence was printed as a so-called broadside on …….. Dutch paper, manufactured by the Zaanse paper mills of Jacob Honig, D. & C. Blauw and Adriaan Rogge.

To cut a long story short: without the Dutch staple market and Dutch entrepreneurs the American Revolution and the American War of Independence would have been unthinkable.

This observation needs some explanation.
In the wake of Columbus, hundreds of Europeans and thousands of enslaved Africans migrated to the New World annually. Between 1660 and 1780, the total population of the British North American colonies grew, annually at a rate of 3 per cent, to become over 2.2 million on the eve of the American Revolution.

The people living in these settlements depended for many consumer goods on imports from Europe, including a wide variety of textiles, metalware, wine, and some Asian products, such as spices and tea. Initially the demand was for very mundane goods, like tools and cheap linen, but over time, especially in the cities a middle-class developed, resulting in a growing demand for more luxurious consumer goods. The colonial elite tried to uphold a fashionable European lifestyle. In other words, the Americans wanted to drink their tea in Wedgewood china. Both had to be imported.

On the other hand, the Dutch staple market functioned as a warehouse for the Western world, where commodities from almost every corner of the globe were sold, including goods manufactured in the Netherlands and spices from Asia. So, the Dutch Republic and the thirteen British colonies were, almost inevitable, economically linked to each other. Despite opposition from the English government in Whitehall, commodities from the Dutch Republic ended up in British North America. One telling sign of this trade is the earlier mentioned paper used for printing the Declaration of Independence.

Long before the American Revolution, several trades had developed between the North American colonies and the Dutch Republic, of which two already had been well established in the seventeenth century.

**Virginia tobacco**

The most important North American commodity shipped to the Netherlands was tobacco. Since 1616, Virginia tobacco arrived in large quantities in the Dutch Republic to be processed into spun tobacco and snuff tobacco. During the first decades Middleburg was the staple for Virginia tobacco. Around 1650, this position was taken over by Amsterdam. The tobacco capital of the world. During the eighteenth century the manufacturing of tobacco, however, shifted once again to Rotterdam. During these years, between 30 and 50 percent of Chesapeake tobacco was shipped to the Dutch Republic. By the 1790s, Rotterdam imported 30 million pounds of American tobacco.
Nieuw Amsterdam – New York

After the loss of Nieuw-Amsterdam in 1664, quasi-legal and semi-illegal trade from New York with the Netherlands, and especially Amsterdam, remained persistent. This so-called “Hollander interest” continued to offer an enviable commercial model among a small but influential minority of colonials. At the end of the seventeenth century, after the influx of English merchants, the New York Assembly passed legislation which taxed exports and imports, and forbid foreign vessels at New York City; they also regulated more vigorously New York’s commerce with New England and Philadelphia, which made the notorious Amsterdam illicit activities of previous decades harder to continue. Before 1690, the number of New York merchants with shares in vessels to Amsterdam was usually between thirty and forty. After that, these numbers began to narrow to about twenty and the number of voyages diminished to just a few in the 1740s. Several Amsterdam merchant houses, including, John de Neufville & Zoon, John Hodshon, Daniel Crommelin & Zoon, Levinus Clarkson and Thomas and Adrian Hope, kept agents and factors in New York to help discount bills of exchange and make money transfers. Despite the decline, Lewis Morris, Judge-Commissary of the New York vice-Court of admiralty noted in 1750: “The [Dutch] are known to be the cheapest carriers in the world”.

Pennsylvania Dutch

Between circa 1680 and the American Revolution over one hundred thousand German-speaking immigrants arrived in the North American colonies. Pennsylvania was by far the most popular destination for colonists from the Rhine Land. The typical German migrant to colonial America followed the Rhine into the Netherlands, embarked at Rotterdam, cleared English customs at Cowes on the Isle of Wight, debarked at Philadelphia, and settled in Pennsylvania. For these so-called Pennsylvania Dutch the gateway to the New Word was the port of Rotterdam.

Carolina Rice

The staple product of South Carolina was rice. South Carolina exported some 2,000,000 pound in the 1710s and over 41,000,000 pound of rice in the 1770s to England annually. On average, over half of this rice was re-exported to the Netherlands, especially to Rotterdam.

The significance of the Netherlands in the Carolina rice trade can be seen in one merchant’s comment in 1752, that the Dutch were “the most considerable buyers” and that they “ruled the market”. This was particularly true in the years just before the American Revolution.
One personification of the close relation between South Carolina and the Netherlands, particular Rotterdam, is Alexander Gillon. Alexander Gillon was born in Rotterdam on 13 August 1741. He settled in Charleston in 1766. In his adopted city, Gillon became a zealous South Carolina patriot. After royal government had collapsed in Charleston in Summer 1775, Gillon served in the provincial congress. His covert activities in Europe in the years to follow are beyond the scope of this essay, but by early 1780 he was back in the Netherlands where he sought financial backing. From his old homeland he send military provisions to North America and he procured the frigate South Carolina, probably build at the Amsterdam Admiraliteits Werf, the largest warship under any American’s command during the War of Independence.

The hollow empire and the “Dutch Trades”

By the middle of the eighteenth century, tensions between the metropolis and enterprising colonials intensified. In this respect, the Seven Years’ War (1754-1763), also known as the French and Indian War, acted as the overture of the War of Independence. During this conflict in the Atlantic a violent imperial competition between France and Great Britain resulted first in a decisive victory for the British and the French loss of Canada, followed by a troubled attempt by metropolitan authorities to construct a new British empire along lines that would permit them to exercise effective control over colonies and conquests alike. The war set in motion the forces that created a hollow British empire, eventually resulting in the secession of the thirteen North American colonies. One of these forces was interloping. For the Americans, interloping and boycotting British products became acts of defying British colonial rule. For Dutch entrepreneurs it was business as usual.

By the 1750s, of all North Americas interloping activities, the one known to contemporaries as “the Dutch trade” was the most sophisticated and best integrated into the colonies commercial culture. The Dutch trade was the shipping of goods from the Netherlands to North America, directly or indirectly via the West Indies, without fulfilling the Crowns requirements that the merchant vessel stop at a port in Great Britain and enter its goods, and/or landing the goods in the colony without paying the proper customs. The Dutch trade was a source of tea, calico, muslin, and taffeta from India, as well as more mundane articles like paper and glazed tiles. “There is no trade here that brings so much gain as this contraband trade from Holland” wrote a New Yorker in the 1750s. Teas and Dutch India goods in general are now sold by our retailers cheaper [than in the British Isles]”. 

Tea

For the British, tea was at the centre of the problem of empire. By the 1750s, legal tea imports probably rivalled the great quantities already smuggled directly from foreign ports. In Amsterdam John Hodshon, Thomas & Adrian Hope, and John de Neuville purchased modest quantities of tea and sold it, for instance, to Thomas & John Hancock in Boston. In 1760, the Hope brothers bought at the auction of the Dutch East India Company for over one million guilders a massive 600,000 pound of tea to flood the North American tea market.

After the Seven Years’ war, to pay for the newly arrived British soldiers in North America, Parliament passed several acts to raise revenue in the colonies, including a duty on tea and other commodities destined for the colonies. These acts met with stiff opposition in the colonies, prompting the occupation of Boston by British troops in 1768 and a boycott of British goods. The British government responded with the Tea Act in 1773. By then, 75 percent of all tea in British North America was imported clandestine, predominantly from the Dutch Republic. December 16, 1773, the arrival of a shipment of East India Company tea triggered the famous Boston Tea Party.

What followed is history. Three years later, the Declaration of Independence was signed and printed on Dutch paper. During the following War of Independence Dutch entrepreneurs provided the American insurgents with guns, cannons, powder and textiles for uniforms. To pay for these provisions, massive amounts of tobacco, indigo and rice were shipped to the Dutch Republic. This contraband trade was conducted via Saint Eustatius, also know as the Golden Rock.

To conclude. The illicit activities of the so-called “Dutch trades” undermined royal authority in North America. Dutch merchants and their American counterparts were at the pinnacle of the forces that created a hollow British empire, eventually resulting in the secession of the thirteen North American colonies.