



# **Rum and Axes: The Rise of a Connecticut Merchant Family, 1795-1850 (Anthropology of Contemporary Issues)**

*Janet Siskind*

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Janet Siskind goes back to the beginnings of industrial capitalism in the United States to better understand the formation of the country's capitalist culture. She studies the papers and letters of three generations of the Watkinson family. The stories of their lives demonstrate how merchants amassed the capital to become industrial entrepreneurs, organized factories and private corporations, and constructed philanthropic and cultural institutions. The author traces how "upper-class work," the everyday tasks of organizing and maintaining trade or a system of production, shaped the family's experience and New England's culture. The result is an intimate story of social class and capitalism.

The reader comes to know several members of this enterprising family, who emigrated from England in 1795. The young women married merchants; their brothers prospered as merchants in Connecticut's West Indian trade. The author shows how their account books, which balanced the imports of rum with the exports of horses, obscured the system of slavery that created their wealth.

After the War of 1812, the Watkinsons and their nephews the Collinses turned from trade to manufacturing textiles and axes. Their letters paint a vivid picture of the difficult process of shaping farmers' sons into a disciplined workforce and entrepreneurs into industrial and financial capitalists. Siskind skillfully blends social history and cultural anthropology to provide context for the engaging narrative of the Watkinsons' lives.

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