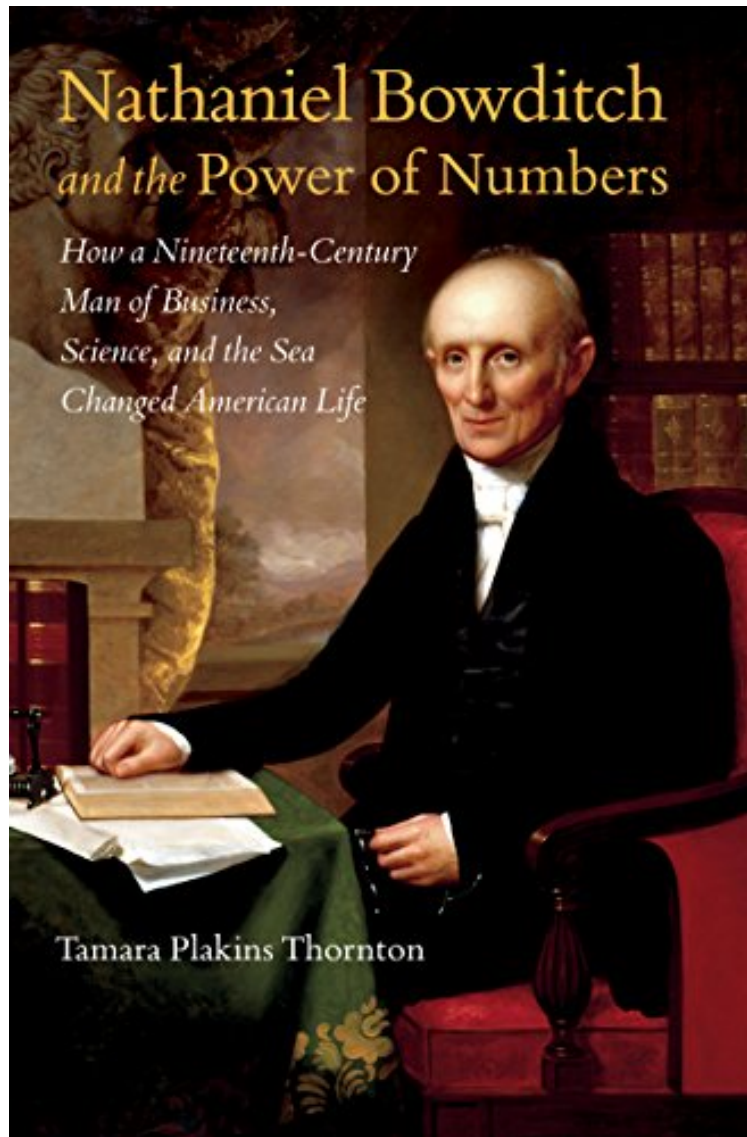


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## **Nathaniel Bowditch and the Power of Numbers: How a Nineteenth-Century Man of Business, Science, and the Sea Changed American Life**

*Tamara Plakins Thornton*

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**Tamara Plakins Thornton : Nathaniel Bowditch and the Power of Numbers: How a Nineteenth-Century Man of Business, Science, and the Sea Changed American Life** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it

would be worth my time, and all praised Nathaniel Bowditch and the *Power of Numbers: How a Nineteenth-Century Man of Business, Science, and the Sea Changed American Life*:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great Examination of the Social Role of Early American Science!By RDDIn "Nathaniel Bowditch and the Power of Numbers: How a Nineteenth-Century Man of Business, Science, and the Sea Changed American Life", Tamara Plakins Thornton argues, Bowditch's "purely scientific publications lacked originality and enduring significance. But when he brought his mathematician's sensibility to America's business, academic, and cultural institutions, he transformed the world of practical affairs" (pg. 1). In this way, "he put forward a vision of the corporation as a clockwork mechanism. If we want to understand the origins of that touchstone of modern life, that cornerstone of modern capitalism – the impersonal bureaucracy – then we must look to Bowditch. He will point us to the role of quantitative science in transforming American life" (pg. 1). Through her examination of Bowditch, Thornton complicates the historiography of modern capitalism and further demonstrates the social role of science in American history. Thornton describes Bowditch's mathematical education as part of a trade, writing, "Much more obvious models for a boy with unusual mathematical ability were those individuals belonging to the now extinct category of mathematical practitioners. These men, who were not college educated, functioned as jacks of all mathematical trades" (pg. 25). Examining Bowditch's "New American Practical Navigator", Thornton writes, "Ostensibly the Navigator made it possible for any man with enough ambition and three dollars in his pocket to track the open ocean. The book's key innovation in this respect was its easy-to-use method of taking and working a lunar observation, the advanced technique for determining longitude" without a chronometer (pg. 57). Of Bowditch's mathematical work, Thornton argues, "Numbers meant not just abstraction but also certainty, and here too Bowditch experienced a kind of aesthetic appreciation, even a spiritual quest that emanated from the core of his personality. Eventually that quest shaped his design of impersonal intuitions, but in the realm of pure computation it meant that Bowditch would find equal pleasure in generating accurate numbers and identifying erroneous ones" (pg. 77). Thornton continues, "Regularity, uniformity, method: allegiance to these values had guided Bowditch in his work on the 'Navigator' and would enter into his work in business affairs most forcefully in the 1820s and 1830s" (pg. 94). Despite this, "Bowditch himself understood that what recognition he had in Europe was not due to an original, or even truly significant, contribution to knowledge. That could only occur much later, once he completed the project he undertook in these years, the translation and annotation of Pierre-Simon Laplace's magisterial 'Mécanique Céleste'. Bowditch's work on this chef d'oeuvre of the era's greatest mathematical astronomer would be the major intellectual labor of his lifetime, and it abounded with possibilities and problems alike" (pg. 111). Of the role of science in society, Thornton writes, "Committed to the ideal of the Republic of Letters, Bowditch took a jaundiced view of any attempt to corrupt the content of science with an ideological agenda. Though a confirmed patriot, he did not exclude nationalism from those corrupting influences" (pg. 125). Following the War of 1812, businesses began to adopt methods from the sciences. Thornton writes, "Science and the world of learning had long offered models for systematizing practices" (pg. 170). She continues, in Boston, "Bowditch was introducing a new model of business operations: all matters should adhere to fixed rules, regardless of the persons involved. As we have seen, in practice there was often flexibility, but it is significant that the ideal of inflexibility found widespread support" (pg. 181). Of Bowditch's work in Boston businesses and Harvard, Thornton writes, "Elite Bostonians needed Bowditch's take-no-prisoners approach to putting affairs in order. Under his leadership the Life Office was making money for them and preserving their wealth for future generations, and Harvard was back on track, yielding its own sort of dividends to current and future generations of Brahmins" (pg. 216). Further linking society and science, Thornton describes the response to Bowditch's translation of Laplace's "Mécanique Céleste", writing, "High-quality printing...reflected America's technological accomplishment and its level of taste. The reputations of nations were at stake" (pg. 220). Further, "In a few cases, Bowditch's European correspondents went beyond formulaic, often patronizing sentiments and approached Bowditch as a fellow citizen of the Republic of Letters. The hallmark of that relationship was reciprocal exchange" (pg. 223). Thornton concludes that, while modern historians continue to use Bowditch's translation of "Mécanique Céleste", there remains much to study about his place in the history of capitalism.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. no one has ever thought that this might be a useful question--this is a must readBy CustomerA lovely read, meticulously researched and important. For any one interested in how ideas and mathematics of navigation and business might fit together--ok, no one has ever thought that this might be a useful question--this is a must read. An intellectual biography with a difference.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. One of Our Many Unknown HeroesBy Randy SalesThis biography does two things very well: 1) It gives us a believable window into typical lives in the years between the American revolution and civil wars, and 2) It brings to light an individual that is not well known today but still of significance to all of us for multiple reasons. Starting with category two, I hope this is a new genre of biography: less known figures that make up the fabric of our times by contributing key practices and principles, without necessarily being political lights, yet being bright enough to illuminate the communities they inhabit. Most of us have no idea who Nathaniel Bowditch was, I certainly didn't. But the big and little names of his time knew him and of him. And he affected the lives of many, by his writings and translations, and his impact on how

business is organized and overseen to provide transparency and integrity in deals, asset management and investments. He kept his honor and integrity intact through many opportunities to excel financially by doing otherwise. He held family and community close, expecting much of all, especially himself. He also knew how to laugh and play and allow others to be different while still maintaining strong and well supported opinions. Most of our biographies are about our heroes, those that stand out because of politics or business. This one could be about you or me. For every hero we read about, there are hundreds that followed their dreams and were a blessing to others, staying below the radar and yet affecting and inspiring many around and above them. Without the environment, infrastructure and integrity these many unknowns contribute, there would be no place we could recognize as our world today. We all could grow and be encouraged from knowing about more of these unknown heroes. My hope is that this book would add to the trend of teaching and learning about those individuals that feel more approachable than our heroes and that offer significant insight and encouragement in how to live lives that make a difference and leave a trail of truth that others can conceive of as possible for themselves. Regarding category one, I've read many books about the two wars mentioned, and several about the period between, but most history is about war and politics, filled with times of extremity and personalities most of us only see on TV nowadays. Getting to hear about families and individuals that lived "normal" lives, before steam and electric power, makes it possible to imagine living in that world. These types of stories restore value and significance to ordinary lives and living, which is where the majority of us will live our lives and leave our legacies. Without taking from the value of our heroes, this book adds to the value of the rest of us. Highly recommended.

In this engagingly written biography, Tamara Plakins Thornton delves into the life and work of Nathaniel Bowditch (1773-1838), a man Thomas Jefferson once called a "meteor in the hemisphere." Bowditch was a mathematician, astronomer, navigator, seafarer, and business executive whose Enlightenment-inspired perspectives shaped nineteenth-century capitalism while transforming American life more broadly. Enthralled with the precision and certainty of numbers and the unerring regularity of the physical universe, Bowditch operated and represented some of New England's most powerful institutions—from financial corporations to Harvard College—as clockwork mechanisms. By examining Bowditch's pathbreaking approaches to institutions, as well as the political and social controversies they provoked, Thornton's biography sheds new light on the rise of capitalism, American science, and social elites in the early republic. Fleshing out the multiple careers of Nathaniel Bowditch, this book is at once a lively biography, a window into the birth of bureaucracy, and a portrait of patrician life, giving us a broader, more-nuanced understanding of how powerful capitalists operated during this era and how the emerging quantitative sciences shaped the modern experience.

An excellent survey of Bowditch's life, including his family background, childhood, marriage, and children, as well as the opportunities and choices that defined his career.--*Journal of Interdisciplinary History* Strongly recommended [for] anyone with an interest in the history of early America and the history of navigation and science in the early nineteenth century. . . . An excellent biography.--*NavList* Sheds a striking light on the science and activities of the early United States, and therefore is an important contribution to our historical understanding.--*Nautical Numbers* This is an outstanding book, and the author's research and writing are excellent.--*Diary of an Autodidact* Thornton's biography of Bowditch is remarkably fluid and her rich narrative profiles the social, economic and cultural issues that surrounded this extremely complicated man. . . . Give[s] the reader a probing, thoughtful, descriptive work about an unorthodox, quasi-genius Yankee.--*The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* The work is insightful in the manner in which it connects Bowditch's life and work to the rise of bureaucracy and capitalism in the US. . . . It deserves a presence in all libraries. Recommended.--*Choice* A real pleasure to read. . . . Thornton writes beautifully and uncomplicatedly about subjects that are neither beautiful nor uncomplicated. She breathes life and excitement into ledger books, forms, and actuarial tables and paints vivid portraits of corporate board meetings.--*American Historical* This recommended biography rediscovers an eccentric who was key in improving several emerging industries. Readers of early American history will find a rich story that moves between New England high society and the founding of the natural sciences.--*Library Journal* [Thornton] describes in an enjoyable way the lifestyle and society of Salem, at that time a wealthy port town, second only to Boston in New England.--*International Journal of Maritime History* An intelligent and reliable source of accurate information and an often charming account of a remarkably gifted mathematician/bureaucrat who rebuilt American corporate practice on strict mathematical principals.--*Isis Journal* A far more sophisticated account of a diverse career than has been available previously, offering a more plausible account of a man driven by number and showing how this played out in different spheres.--*Mariner's Mirror* Shows Nathaniel Bowditch as [a] business innovator. . . . [and] is a portrait of Salem during its golden age.--*Salem News* I loved this book from beginning to end. Well written, well argued, well organized, thoroughly researched, interesting, and thought-provoking, Tamara Thornton writes with complete command of both her immediate subject, Nathaniel Bowditch, and all the larger issues surrounding his life.--*Sharon Ann Murphy, Providence College* Thornton tells a fascinating story with considerable grace, and her conclusions make a significant contribution to the issue of social, economic, and cultural transformation

in the early nineteenth century. Nathaniel Bowditch and the Power of Numbers is, among other things, a fluent biography of a significant if curious American public figure who possessed a broad splash of eccentricity that any reader would enjoy encountering.--Daniel Vickers, University of British Columbia  
About the Author  
Tamara Plakins Thornton is professor of history at the State University of New York, Buffalo.