

Why do you think the commissariat was central to the early colonial economy?

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Question: Why do you think the commissariat was central to the early colonial economy?

When Australia was being colonised by Britain, a commissariat which was an organised system by which the colonizer's military posts, armies and settlers were supplied with food and other daily necessities were set up. Andrew Miller was the first Commissary General and his initial assignment was to provide as well as to coordinate the supply of food supplies and other essential provisions to the fighters.[1] Little did he know the duties of the institution he was the leader were going to expand and be very influential to the Britain's economy abroad. The functions of the commissariat were expanded as the settlement in Australia increased in size and in complexity such that for the first about thirty years major economic activities were executed under the commissariat.[2] This paper is going to analyse the actual role and impact of the commissariat during the colonial economy of Australia, which made it to be perceived as central to the early colonial economy of Britain abroad, especially in its agent role it played in providing, keeping and issuing of food stores, fuel and light for use; later being the sources of foreign exchange, sources of local legal tenders for exchange, its role as a banking and credit service provider especially in private banking practice, the ability to influence market prices and subsidies and its role in re-allocating productive activities and encouraging participation in those productive activities. Importantly, this private economy was created to support Britain's penal regime in Australia[3]

Britain had its people and soldiers in their Australia colony. Life was challenging because they were aliens to the land and they therefore needed

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a reliable supply of foodstuffs, medicines and other necessities. As a result, the commissariat was set up and assigned the role of daily and weekly issuance of the rations to all government convicts and British population in Australia particularly in the early years.[4] The army also needed facilitation in form of fuel and ammunition. It is the commissariat that played the role of government store in the Town of Sydney and the Colony. This body also coordinated the shipment of these supplies from Britain. For a time, it was very crucial because it was the only market available for the colony's produce. It had been set to supply goods to colonial establishments of Britain.

With the introduction of free merchant shipping, Australia was open for international transactions and this increased rate of supplies to the increasing demand for commodities in Australia. More ships frequented the Port from England and other nations[5]. The commissariat was representative of Britain and on this capacity, it transacted at the port where it obtained foreign exchange from Spain and other countries. The Spanish dollar was readily accepted as an international coinage and was used as the main currency by most English colonies and Australia was not an exception[6]. Slowly, the Spain dollar left the country because it was constantly used to pay for goods brought to Australia by the visiting maritime ships. A variety of foreign coinage was also left in Australia by the visiting ships as change from government bills through the commissariat.

In the colony, there was acute shortage of ready cash. Another problem was with the highly rated Commissariat credit Store. And for the colonial economy to grow, transactions had to take place. As a result the store issued

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receipts that readily circulated through out the colony. With the traditional barter system running along, these two modes became the medium of exchange i the colony as the economy moved from convict to a systematic market.[7] The barter system of goods where goods were exchanged for others was very helpful to the free settlers who had fully served their jail terms. They needed to buy commodities and out of this demand, a complex system of barter trade was put in place and many debts were settled by use of their farm produce, land and through offering to work for who owed you money.

The Commissariat was the major buyer of local products and in exchange, it issued store receipts for produce that was in small quantity. If the store receipts accumulated, they could be claimed for treasury bills but on their own the receipts became instruments that you could negotiate settle your debts within the colony.[8] Some of the medium for exchange were alcohol spirits (rum), sugar, tobacco, wheat, livestock and varrious meat types. Another substitute for currency was promissory notes that were privately owned. these notes circulated for long periods and were rarely presented for payment. Salaries to government staff in New South Wales were settled by use of government bills [9]. This continued until enough cash was introduced and was circulating in the colonies. The money against which the bills were drawn was all held in England because they anticipated New South Wales to become self sufficient soon and therefore there was no need for currency medium.

With the rapid expansion of the commissariat's functions, its role gradually changed from store keeping and supplies coordination when the Ordinance <https://assignbuster.com/why-do-you-think-the-commissariat-was-central-to-the-early-colonial-economy/>

storekeeper positions were established. It became virtual financial branch for the British treasury where it continued to pay military forces in N. S. W and for convict establishments until 1870 when this office was abolished[10]. The commissariat accessed credit in Britain by use of bills to offset overseas purchases. The bills provided an avenue offinancefor banking and commerce development. Since the colony had no treasury, the Commissariat assumed the role of unofficial bank.

The commissariat planned the work which the convicts in government service had to do. They assigned them duties in the logging and lumbering, timber making, in the dock yard, in brick and tiles making and in stone dressing yards which produced materials locally for government construction. It also arranged for employment of many convicts farms for vegetables, orchards, grains and animal farms to supply food to the colony.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the commissariat was the economic engine to the colony and played key roles, though changed with time, which ranged from developing Britain's economy in Australia to setting up an economic base for the colony by involving convicts in nation building activities.

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