At the end of the century, the sale of calicoes to the men and women of the Spanish empire became a challenge for the hundreds of calico manufacturers and merchants in Spain and its colonies. If by the turn of the century the debate over the benefits or evils of luxury and fashion had ended with a certain approval of the moral and economic rewards from the making of calicoes, the problem was now how to make this coveted fabric reach every corner of the empire. The almost continuous wars Spain faced at different intervals between England and France jeopardized the ability that manufacturers had to sell their fabrics across the Atlantic. Yet once again the flexibility that the family offered the commercial house allowed for the entire calico industry to survive, and even prosper, during the tumultuous years between the 1790s and the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century. Rapidly changing political and economic circumstances forced the “commercial houses” to adopt new approaches quickly in order to profit, such as reducing the size of their transactions and diversifying their activities. All of these survival strategies, however, depended on families and the creation of networks throughout Spain and in America. The success of companies ultimately depended on such family ties and a hierarchical organization based on trust, loyalty, and obedience. Such sentiments compelled every member of the commercial house to work hard for the survival of the family’s business during times of exceptional uncertainty.

The following four sections of this chapter roughly coincide with the principal stages of this long period of hostilities and the race to

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Clothe the Spanish American colonies. The first section examines the war between Spain and France from 1793 to 1795. The activities of merchants and entrepreneurs in America during the first war against England from 1796 until 1802 are the focus of the second section. A third section examines the renewal of war between Spain and England from 1802 to 1808. Although the supremacy of the English navy depressed the Spanish transatlantic traffic in textiles, families in the calico trade demonstrated surprising resiliency and the ability to adapt under extremely difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, the fourth section will demonstrate how the daily struggle for survival in this age of war also tore apart families on both sides of the Atlantic.

Selling Calicoes to America, 1792–1795

During the early 1790s the climax of the calico industry in the Spanish empire coincided with the expansion of trade between Barcelona and the American colonies. Between 1784 and 1786 Barcelona saw the establishment of 112 factories. Between 1792 and 1794 the number of factories increased to 150.1 Half of the calicoes made in these factories went to customers in America. The 1778 Free Trade Regulation had facilitated traffic in textiles by opening trade between Spanish ports and several major colonial destinations. In 1789 Venezuela and the large and populous viceroyalty of New Spain, initially excluded from the 1778 decree, joined the list of regions that enjoyed direct trade with Spanish ports.2 Veracruz, New Spain’s most important port, witnessed an extraordinary increase in Spanish imports of all kinds, particularly of calicoes.3 Free access to Veracruz allowed calico traders to reach consumers in the interior as well as other ports in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

In the thirteen years between 1778 and 1792, exports of calicoes from Spain to all the American colonies increased an impressive 500 percent.4 In 1792 alone, Barcelona exported 3,338,061 yards of calicoes, an increase of 110 percent from the previous year.5 That same year, the traffic of exports from Barcelona to New Spain reached its historical climax for the period between the end of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth.6 Also in 1792 the city witnessed the construction of a new customhouse in the Plaça de Palau, adjacent to La Llotja, and the founding of a daily newspaper, Diari de Barcelona. Its listings of all arrivals and departures of ships from the city’s harbor, with the names of each ship’s captain and owner, made this publication extremely helpful to merchants.7 As all this make plain by 1792 Barcelona’s merchant community was ready to embrace a future of continuing expansion in trade.