PART ONE: ALCOHOL

Kajette Solomon: Do you see the shelves across from the fireplace that look like they're built out of a giant clam shell? The alcohol case is just to the right of that.

At some point, most of the objects in this case were sipped from and passed around tables during celebrations with friends and family.

> **Janette Bloomfield:** It was like providing that ambience and everybody could talk and laugh.

That's my mom again. And I know for our family, homemade carrot juice flavored with white rum was part of what made our Sunday dinners memorable.

> **Janette Bloomfield:** The table was set and everybody got to drink out of their own cup and glass. And then you'd have carrot juice, which was the main juice we'd make for Sunday dinner.

A lot of us have these kinds of special drinks with family. But caught up in the warmth of it all, rarely do we ask, how does this stuff even get to our tables? Where does alcohol come from?

Look at the two gray stoneware jugs with blue lettering on the bottom shelf of this case.

You might notice that they look pretty different from the rest of the objects in the case: they're really rough and simple. They look so haphazard because it didn't really matter what they looked like. These sorts of jugs weren't displayed on dinner tables. They were used to store and carry alcohol. They were used for trade.

And at some point, jugs like these were stored in the cellar of an old brick building that was one of the most prosperous centers of trade in North America. And this building— called Market House— happens to be just across the street from where you're standing right now.

If you walk through the square alongside the Providence River where Market House stands today, you'd never know that it used to be a massive center of trade. The only people you'd encounter are college students speed walking to their next class or the occasional skateboarder doing kickflips.

But in the 18th and 19th centuries, Market House was bustling.

There were mules hauling carts of alcohol jugs to be loaded onto ships at the wharf just outside. There were huge open arches at the front of the building with vendors arranging newly imported blocks of sugar.

But where did this stuff even come from and where was it going? Who was on the other end of this trade?

> **Chris Roberts:** Rhode Island is a state that came to prominence via trade. There are many trades that the state was involved in but the trade that really gave the state it's boom, that moved it forward, that really brought in sustained financial value was the transatlantic slave trade, was slavery.

Scholar Chris Roberts is standing at the front of Market House. He studies the history of trade in Rhode Island, and as he's researched, a lot of the goods that came through Market House were shipped to the west coast of Africa to be exchanged for enslaved people.

> **Chris Roberts:** A lot of people think, 'Oh Rhode Island is in the North. It had nothing to do with slavery. It wasn't really involved. The weather here isn't great. How could you cultivate any crops? Yes, if you're only thinking about the institutional aspect of slavery.

> **Chris Roberts:** So the form of slavery that we tend to think about in movies and films with images of people working on plantations, cultivating crops. That's what you can think of as the institution of slavery, meaning the doing of the manual labor. There's a whole different half— the business of slavery meaning the ships that go out to port in the first place and that really comes to a crux in Rhode Island.

Rhode Island was intimately involved in the business of slavery. There weren't many enslaved people living and working in the state, but it made a lot of money through the slave trade.

Rhode Island merchants frequently traveled to the continent Africa with their jugs of alcohol, exchanged them for enslaved people, then brought these people to the Caribbean, exchanged them for sugar (which enslaved people from past trades had cultivated), and brought those goods back up to Rhode Island to be processed and shipped out to the continent of Africa all over again.

It was a perpetual, sinister money-making cycle, and Rhode Island was leading the way for it. In fact, 60% of all slave trading voyages launched from North American were led by tiny little Rhode Island.

What this means is that most of the goods at Market House were in some way involved in slavery— whether they were processed commodities cultivated by enslaved people that were sold to locals or barrels of rum soon to be shipped to the continent of Africa.

> **Chris Roberts:** Yeah, a site as innocuous as a market, which we might think, 'Oh it was where people went to get things for the day, and buy things they were going to eat and cook later…' That's as caught up in this history as anything else.

That's the thing. It's not always the site that on its face is associated with something really terrible. Sometimes it's the everyday place that we don't even think about.

Chris Roberts: It's really crucial to understand that slavery wasn't some out-of-the-norm, extreme facet of the world. It was very built in to peoples' lives…All you had to do to be involved with slavery in this time period was to be alive in this time period.

The foundation of trade in Rhode Island was completely tied up with the exploitation of people— it was slavery that made it possible for any old townsperson to walk over to the market and get a block of sugar or a bottle of alcohol—even though it may seem like a completely innocent thing on the surface.

And today, just across the street from where you are standing right now, buses and leaf blowers and skateboarders go about their daily business, unaware of the dark history of the old Market Square they inhabit.

And all of the objects around you in this gallery— they may seem like everyday alcohol jugs and teacups, but they are completely tied up in these same complicated histories of trade.

Chris Roberts: What are the aspects of our everyday lives in terms of asking where things come from, how are they made. Things just end up on our table and we don't ask how it got there or where it came from or anything like that.

This has been Part One of the Trading Earth Soundwalk. In Part Two, we'll consider how these complicated histories have impacted how we eat and drink today.