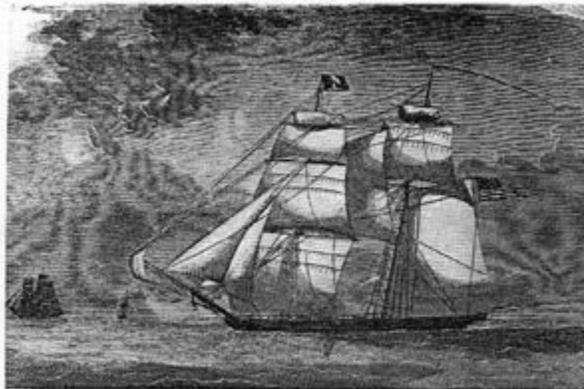


The Prices of Commodities Jumped During the War of 1812



THE PRIVATEER BRIG *GENERAL ARMSTRONG*
CAPTAIN S. C. REID, COMMANDER
Which fought a most thrilling battle in the harbor of Fayal.

Brig. General Armstrong

In war, as in other troublesome times, prices are subject to fluctuate in price. Two great staples were flour and sugar, mostly lacking due to impeded water transport. From a table of prices current, of August, 1813, it appears that at Baltimore, in the centre of the wheat export, flour was \$6.00 per barrel; in Philadelphia, \$7.50; in New York, \$8.50; in Boston, \$11.87. At Richmond, owing to inferior communications, the price was \$4.00. Flour at Charleston was reported at \$8.00, while at Wilmington, North Carolina, it was \$10.25. At Boston, sugar which was unblockaded, was quoted at \$18.75 the hundredweight, itself not a low rate; while at New York the blockaded rate was \$21.50; at Philadelphia, with a longer journey, \$22.50; at Baltimore, \$26.50. At Savannah sugar was \$20, because considering its nearness to the Florida line and inland navigation, smuggling was a successful and safe venture. New Orleans was a sugar-producing district, and the cost was \$9.00, however, on February 1, 1813, flour in that city cost \$25 a barrel.

The British vessels forcibly harassed trade up and down the east coast, especially between Boston and New York. Although the South was more

remotely situated, it had better internal water communications. Also, the local product, rice, went far to supply deficiencies in other grains.

In the matter of manufactured goods, however, the disadvantage of the South was greater. These had to find their way there from the farther extreme of the land; for the development of manufactures had been much the most marked in the east. It has before been quoted that some wagons loaded with dry goods were forty-six days in accomplishing the journey from Philadelphia to Georgetown, South Carolina, in May of this year. Some relief in these articles reached the South by smuggling across the Florida line, and the Spanish waters opposite St. Marys were at this time thronged with merchant shipping to an unprecedented extent; for although smuggling was continual, in peace as in war, across a river frontier of a hundred miles, the stringent demand consequent upon the interruption of coastwise traffic provoked an increased supply.

"The trade to Amelia," the northernmost of the Spanish sea-islands, was reported by the United States naval officer at St. Marys towards the end of the war, "is immense. Upwards of fifty square-rigged vessels are now in that port under Swedish, Russian, and Spanish colors, two thirds of which are considered British property." Letters from the naval captains commanding the stations at Charleston, Savannah, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire reflect news of the molesting by the British of trade. Captain Hull who commanded the Portsmouth Yard, wrote on June 14, 1813, that light cruisers like the "Siren", lately arrived at Boston, and the "Enterprise," could be very useful in driving away the small vessels of the enemy as well as privateers.

He proposes to order them eastward, along the Maine coast, to collect coasters in convoy and protect their long-shore voyages, after the British fashion on the high seas. "The coasting trade here," he adds, "is immense. Not less than fifty sail last night anchored in this harbor, bound to Boston and other points south.": And, the "Nautilus" (a captured United States

brig) has been seen from this harbor every week for some time past, and several other vessels (of the enemy) are on the coast every few days."

An American privateer has just come in, bringing with her as a prize one of her own class, called the "Liverpool Packet," which "within six months has taken from us property to an immense amount." On one occasion the crew of the ship of an American privateer, which had been destroyed after a desperate and celebrated resistance to attack by British armed boats, arrived at St. Marys. Of one hundred and nineteen American seamen, only four could be prevailed upon to enter the district naval force. This was partly due to the embarrassment of the national finances. "The want of funds to pay off discharged men," wrote the naval captain at Charleston, "has given such a character to the navy as to stop recruiting." "Men could be had," reported his colleague at St. Marys, now transferred to Savannah, "were it not for the Treasury notes, which cannot be passed at less than five per cent discount. Men will not ship without cash.

There are upwards of a hundred seamen in port, but they refuse to enter, even though we offer to ship for a month only." It should be noted, however, that those who enlisted during the War of 1812 were promised bounty lands, should they serve five years. Those sailors stationed at St. Marys, Georgia, received land grants in Camden County of 487-1/2 acres.

This is an interesting facet to research because where one sees this sort of acreage listed in the deed records or on tax digests, they should investigate the 1812 service records on the site of the National Archives. This will help zero in on more clues and historical data. In these operations the ships of war were seconded by privateers from the West Indies, which hovered round this coast, as the Halifax vessels did round that of New England, seeking such scraps of prize money as might be left over from the ruin of American commerce and the immunities of the licensed traders.

The United States officers at Charleston and Savannah were at their wits ends to provide security with their scanty means, more scanty even in men

than in vessels; and when there came upon them the additional duty of enforcing the embargo of December, 1813, in the many quarters, and against the various subterfuges, by which evasion would be attempted, the task was manifestly impossible. "This is the most convenient part of the world for illicit trade that I have ever seen," wrote Campbell.

A somewhat singular incidental circumstance is found in the spasmodic elevation of the North Carolina coast into momentary commercial consequence as a place of entry and deposit; not indeed to a very great extent, but ameliorating to a slight degree the deprivation of the regions lying north and south, the neighborhood of Charleston on the one hand, of Richmond and Baltimore on the other.

"The waters of North Carolina, from Wilmington to Ocracoke, though not favorable to commerce in time of peace, by reason of their shallowness and the danger of the coast, became important and useful in time of war, and a very considerable trade was prosecuted from and into those waters during the late war, and a coasting trade as far as Charleston, attended with less risk than many would imagine.

A vessel may prosecute a voyage from Elizabeth City (near the Virginia line) to Charleston without being at sea more than a few hours at any one time."

During July of 1813, Admiral Cockburn anchored with a division off Ocracoke bar, and captured a privateer and Letter-of-Marque which had there sought a refuge denied to them by the blockade elsewhere. The towns of Beaufort and Portsmouth were occupied for some hours. The United States naval officer at Charleston found it necessary also to extend the alongshore cruises of his schooners as far as Cape Fear, for the protection. Source: *Sea Power In Its Relations to the War of 1812* by Captain A. T. Mahan, D. C. L., LL. D., United State Navy. (London, 1899)