

# BULLETIN *of The* BUSINESS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

INCORPORATED

BAKER LIBRARY, SOLDIERS FIELD, BOSTON, MASS.

*Volume IV, No. 2*

MARCH, 1930

*Whole Number 24*

## A Business Sidelight on the Civil War

THE history of markets, prices, speculations, of mercantile ventures to new territory as it is conquered, during any great war, would make fascinating reading, and fill volumes. A chapter of business history during the Civil War could be written from a folder of old letters discovered among the private business papers of Charles W. Wilder, a partner of the firm of Wilder and Estabrook, which later became Estabrook and Eaton.

The letters relate to the adventures of the tug-boat "Boston" at New Orleans, beginning at the close of General Butler's administration there, and continuing in that of his successor, General Banks, during the year 1863. The "Boston" seems to have arrived hopefully in New Orleans in August, 1862, for Mr. Wilder receives a letter from Colonel Jonas H. French, General Butler's Provost Marshal, to the effect that the "Boston" has arrived safely. Unfortunately, however, she put in at Key West, "where yellow fever is raging fearfully — and of course is now detained a month at quarantine. The safety of our whole command depends upon a very strict quarantine, and it is impossible for us to attempt to vary any regulations the Major Genl. has laid down. . . . However, if I see any chance be assured I will use it to get her off."

The quarantine, like every other feature of Butler's administration, was made a subject for complaint by his enemies. The consuls, who were Southern in their sympathies and affiliations, took

every pretext to quarrel with him, and the detention of the Spanish steamer "Cardenas" for a month was the occasion of hot protests, and even a threat from the Spanish Consul. He was understood, through the interpreter, to announce that if the "Cardenas" were not released, that he would keep a certain American ship quarantined for a month at fever-stricken Havana. In spite of the ill feeling they aroused, the methods of General Butler seem to have been carried out with remarkable effectiveness, for while the fever raged in the neighboring ports of Havana and Nassau, New Orleans had but a single case in 1862.

"New Orleans has often escaped the yellow fever for years in succession," says James Parton in his biography of the General. "The city had *never* escaped it in such circumstances as existed in 1862."

"The markets as I expected are glutted with provisions," continues the letter of Colonel French. "Pork can be bot for 13¢ and bacon for less price than in Boston. The cargo of the Brig Sarah is in the hands of Mr. Newell. I hope he has sold it — or the most of it — if not I shall advise him to hold it for the present. The prices will check shipments — then when the stock is reduced — money can be made. Mr. Newell has bot a good cargo of sugar. It is prime — and I think will give the vessel a good freight.

"We have rumors of the removal of Genl Butler. What does it mean? It will be ruinous to the interests of the government — no policy can control these people save the one Genl Butler has adopted. There is no use to sprinkle these people with rose-water. They laugh at you — and say you are afraid when you attempt to conciliate them.

"But you cant tell what influences are at work at Washington. The more they attempt to crush Ben Butler the higher he will rise. He has more brain than any General they have got."

Between this intense loyalty on the part of his own men and supporters, and the bitter hatred of the people of New Orleans and of the South at large, it is difficult to form a judicial estimate of Butler's character from the testimony of contemporaries. Some of the complexities of his situation at New Orleans are indicated in the preceding extract. While a man of more tact might have left less bitterness behind, the intense anti-Northern feeling in the city at the time made the position of a Northern commanding general there a well-nigh impossible one.

With the next letter, the scene changes from the field of national

policies to the private concerns of the crew of the "Boston." It is a recital of villainies on the part of the captain, signed by the chief engineer and two assistants.

"I write to inform you that I have left the steam Tug Boston," it begins, "as Capt Tibbetts and myself could not agree. I stood his abuse as long as I possibly could he has acted more like an insane man on board of the Boston than anything I can compare him to. in every port that we went into he would go on shore on *business* but come back with about as much *Whiskey* as he could bear."

A defect was discovered in the machinery, and Mr. Shedd, the writer, advised the captain to put into Delaware where the boat was built, "but *no* he kept on and the next main port we went into our machinery was almost a compleat *wreck* that was in Beaufort N. C. . . . From Beaufort we proceeded to *Key West* where the Engine was looked over by a drunken Machinest and pronounced in good order. we were in this place seven days and the last Sunday he got the Boat under way and took a drunken party down the Harbour on pretence of trying the Engine. . . .

"From Key West we arrived safe at the Mouth of the Mississipp-ee we were detained at quarantine thirty days and during that time he was not on board of his own boat one half of the time. . . . a few days before our Quarantine was up he had a grand Jubily by firing up the Boat and going down the river some ten or twelve miles and towing up a schooner for nothing, he had some six or seven Captains and the Whiskey passed pretty freely among all of them. furthermore things that were put on board of the Boat in Boston were thrown over Board by order of Capt Tibbitts such as herring and two bbls of Bread. and some Clorid of lime which was put on board he gave away three Cans. . . . Since we have been in New Orleans he has had a number of things done to the Machinery without consulting me in regard to any thing. and I could not in consience stay on board of the Boat any longer and see things go on in that stile. there is not a man that came out in the Boston that has been used like a man. I can substantiate all that is written above."

Whether or not this story has any truth in it, and if not, what motive led the three engineers to concoct it, does not appear from the letters. One of the partners in the venture later writes, in connection with the affair:

"The Key West part of the story like the rest is all humbug. Shedd is fully entitled to best place known for the devils assistants;" and

in another place, "Captain Tibbetts is a man and a Gentleman and you must know that I felt rather *flat* when I came to get at the facts in the case. But after all it is an agreeable surprise."

The next few letters, from Mr. Newell and Captain Tibbetts, give an account of the towing of various vessels, and of business prospects, with some mention of the progress of the war. Mr. Newell complains that the "Boston" will not be able to tow to the sea much longer on account of certain strong currents which are now running, and again says:

"You want two more boats about three times as large as this one, very fast and then there is money in the towing business on this river. But when the river gets to running strong this boat is too small to tow up against it. She will be a good job boat or if they ever get the river open will be a good boat to tow Barges and flat boats."

Neither Port Hudson nor Vicksburg had been taken at the time these letters were written, and all the references to the situation show the same skepticism.

Mr. Newell thinks that towing barges up the river and bringing down confiscated sugar would be more profitable than the present business, but there would be the risk of being captured by guerillas. He seems generally pessimistic and advises waiting for a favorable chance and selling the boat.

In the next letter he refers to General Butler's alleged disreputable commercial dealings in New Orleans:

"In regard to getting on the right Track to make money if you come out will depend a good deal on the course to be pursued by General Banks if he supercedes Genl Butler as it is now supposed he will.

"For the last two months, there has been no track that did not lead directly into the pockets of the B—'s if Genl Banks allows an open market, & a fair show for outsiders something might be [—?] At present Sugar and molasses is higher than in New York."

Gamaliel Bradford says of the affair:

"Whatever Butler's personal concern with the matter, there was no excuse for the crowd he had about him. All his life he was as loyal in sticking to his friends as he was indiscreet in the choice of them."

The correspondent continues his letter in the same discouraged strain:

"It is not known what is to be undertaken by the troops under Genl Banks, it is reported to day that Vicksburg has been attacked

by the Gun Boats but the result is not known, it is very doubtful whether the opening of the River would improve business here. The stock of provisions is very heavy now & if a passage is made from above down will come any quantity in addition, while the planters have nothing but confederate money, & most of their crops have been confiscated & taken off by the 'Genl Commission,' with hired Negroes to be turned adrift when their services are no longer needed, the truth is the whole system of labor here on plantations has been broken up by the course pursued by those in command."

"Your friend Col French," he says in another place, "has been relieved from his duties as Provo Martial, Col Wright of New York having been appointed in his place. whether Col F. has made a pile of money or not remains to be seen, he has had a good chance & many persons believe he has done so. others doubt it."

Finally, someone seems to be negotiating to buy the "Boston," but the transaction is upset by an order from General Banks, denying all persons passes to Vera Cruz, where the prospective purchaser is.

With things at their gloomiest, a new character, Jesse Boynton, appears on the scene, radiating energy and optimism. His first account of the situation paints Captain Tibbetts in glowing terms:

"Captain Tibbetts is the smartest and best Tow Boat Capt on this River. He is sought after by all Masters of Vessels arriving at this Port. He is more than we bargained for and what is the best part of it the acct of the Boat is quite as much in her favor as we have a right to expect under all circumstances. . . . I am fully persuaded that we must put another Boat on the River. I am going out in the morning to look at one that is offered for sale and if she will do shall put you in for it."

After further commendation for the Captain, and a word for Mr. Newell, who is "a man of the strictest integrity," he continues, under another date, with the fact that he has been to see the boat, and she will not do.

"I do not believe we can get what we want however without building one," he says, "and had better be looking round immediately. We want a Boat of great power 3 times or more that of the Boston, one that costs from 30 to 35 Thousand dollars with a Wrecking pump attached to her. . . . Had Capt T. had such a Boat he would have got 10,000\$ from the Marion. He is always the first man there. If he had the right kind of a Boat here now, she would coin money."

More specifications for the boat follow, two days later, written in an expansive mood:

"We want as good a Hull as can be made and the best and strongest Machinery possible, . . . with large storage capacity for fuel, and ample accommodations for Capt and Crew, . . . considerably Clipper built for this River. . . . Everything should be in the most thorough and substantial manner possible without any regard to the saving of a few hundred dollars but no expense for fancy. All plain. . . . Should there be any parties in this who are not ready to come up unhesitatingly and put in their money for this take their interest in it for me, or you and me as you please. I tell you we are all right we have the right man in the right place."

There is a great deal more discussion of the boat, and an account of some speculations in molasses and sugar Mr. Boynton has undertaken, and an occasional comment on the progress of military operations. The new administration comes in for its share of criticism:

"I asked Capt T. what his opinion was in the event of the establishment of the Southern Confederacy of Northern men remaining here. His reply was he had no fears for himself but some would stand a poor show. The opinion is general here that there will be no important Military movement in this department for the present. The taking of Port Hudson is gone by for this season. The lines of the Federals may be extended to allow those who are in the Ring an opportunity to gobble up Sugar Cotton &c but for or with no view to fight a Battle as that might hurt somebody. One sees no southern men here comparatively, the place is desolated to a great extent. A Gentleman, a northern man from Mass, told me to day that he was working the Plantation of one of three Brothers who are all in the Confed. Army as privates and at the time they went in they had on deposit (675,000\$) Six hundred and seventy five Thousand dollars. The Plantation he is working is valued at a Million dollars. If any one has any doubts of the determination on their part he better look and see what sacrifices are made."

A postscript says: "Great excitement here in the Sugar Market. Also a Battle to come off at Port Hudson;" and later: "Banks defeated at Port Hudson. And apparently chagrined has returned and commenced issuing orders taxing Cotton 5\$ per Bale, Sugar 1.8 pr Hhd Molasses 25¢ per Bbl. . . . I can't see as this is far from a despotism in this department now. No one can tell to day what may be the order for tomorrow."

The discussion of the new boat goes on without any results for

several months, when the whole adventure is brought to a sudden and dramatic close. On June 10 Captain Tibbetts telegraphs, collect, to the effect that "about 15 or 20 men boarded the Boston at half past 9 o'clock last night at Papa Loutre [?] while I was towing in the Bark Jenny Lind. I was on board the Bark at the time, they cut the ropes & left so quick I had not time to get on board the Boston."

The epilogue appears in a letter written in 1867, from Havana, by the captain of another boat, apparently an acquaintance of Wilder's.

"While taking a sail in my boat the other day," it runs, "I thought I recognized an old acquaintance in a rusty looking tug lying away up in the Guanabacoa corner of the bay, and on boarding ascertained that she was the historical 'Boston.'

"She is claimed by parties in Mobile, has a ship-keeper on board. her hull is in good order (but bare of paint) one mast standing, engine not been taken care of, looks rusty, so can not speak for that without proper examination. If I can assist you in reclaiming her, please write me."

Whether or not the "Boston" was ever reclaimed, we do not know, for with this forlorn picture the letters leave her.

## New Committee for the Preservation of Historical Data

THE American Council of Learned Societies has recently formed, in conjunction with The Social Science Research Council, a committee on the enlargement, improvement and preservation of data. Professor Norman S. B. Gras, of Harvard University, has been appointed a member. The work of the committee will be to discover the needs of scholars who are engaged in research in the humanities and the social sciences. Presumably action will be taken later to assist investigators in these subjects. It is obvious that the committee will be doing about the same kind of work as The Business Historical Society, but in a more comprehensive field.