



Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



'Mericiani

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Front Cover: African knife with handle wrapped in “Merican” cloth. Some of the fine cotton sheeting known as “Merican” can be seen loosened from the top of the handle. Knife from the collection of the author.

Below: detail of a stereograph of cotton being loaded on steamboats in Memphis, Tennessee in 1904. Most likely, this cotton would have been taken down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. From there, the cotton would have been shipped to mills in the northern United States or in Europe. From the collection of George E. Briggs, Jr.



Since the earliest days of colonization in the New World, the manic pursuit of riches and exploitation of previously unclaimed fertile lands drove the economies of the major European powers. Columbus's discovery of the Caribbean islands in 1492 ushered in an era of colonial competition unprecedented in the consumption and degradation of human life for the production of agricultural products. First among these was West Indian sugar. Another was cotton.

According to Homans' *Cyclopedia of Commerce*, cotton was found in use by Native American peoples in 1492 in Cuba, and within the following fifty years was observed in Peru, Mexico, and what were to become Texas and California. Precisely when cotton growing by European settlers in continental North America first took place is unclear, but seed for sea-island (Anguilla) cotton from the Bahamas was first cultivated on islands along the Georgia coast about 1785.¹

American Cotton Production

American production of cotton was not of great consequence until a practical cotton gin (engine) to remove seeds and debris was patented by Eli Whitney in 1793. Once an efficient means for processing raw cotton became readily available, the cotton industry took off beyond all expectations.² The consequences that followed were a new world market, a labor shortage requiring extensive exploitation of plantation slaves, and finally, a moral dilemma resulting from changing social consciousness during the first half of the 19th century.

Once cotton production became established in the southern United States, a new trade pattern evolved. This was to become known as the cotton triangle. The major cotton exporting ports were Charleston, SC, Savannah, GA, New Orleans, LA, and Mobile, AL. In one of many variants of the triangle, the cotton was shipped from one of the southern ports to Liverpool, England, or Le Havre, France. The ship returned via New York with European goods (or it may have loaded Northern manufactured goods while at New York) to the port of origin. New York became the major trans-shipment port for cotton brought north by American coasting vessels. At New York, it was either consigned for delivery overseas or to northern mills, of which the earliest permanent American establishment was Samuel Slater's spinning mill in Pawtucket, RI. As the cotton manufacturing industry evolved, Boston became an important market for cotton. Portsmouth, NH, also became a significant destination for cargoes of cotton.

Early mills were sited near flowing rivers or channeled water sources to take advantage of the drop in elevation to power their machines. The topography of

New England was particularly favorable to water powered mills. The most basic example of this technology, seventeenth-century waterwheels, may be seen at Saugus Iron Works NHS. A much more sophisticated nineteenth-century version is to be found at Lowell NHP, where horizontal submerged geared turbines were used rather than vertical wheels.

With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Salem's prosperity was threatened as her specialized shipping activities as a "neutral carrier" became irrelevant. Trade did not grind to a halt, but it was greatly diminished. The death of Joseph Peabody in 1844 foretold the end of Salem's China trade. The direct Salem-to-Sumatra pepper trade ceased in 1846. The mainstays of Salem's trade were slipping away.

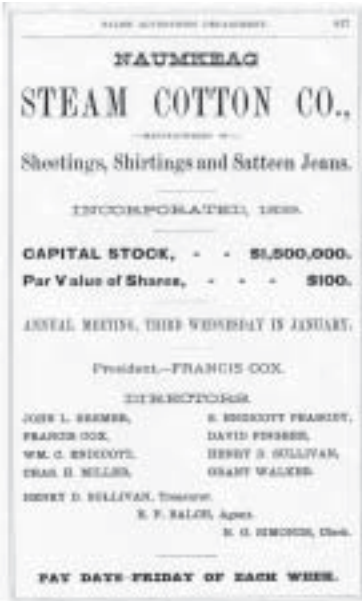
Salem's business interests explored ways to evolve with changing times. In the early 19th century, canals and, later, railroads permitted manufacturing to develop in locations formerly too far from potential markets by making freight transportation more economical. Local investors saw potential opportunity for Salem to regain her prosperity by combining railroad and water transport and modifying her markets.

Several Massachusetts railroads were chartered, beginning in 1830 with the Boston and Lowell, with Boston being the central point of origin. The first roads extended north to Lowell and west toward Providence and Worcester. Less than twenty miles northeast of Boston, Salem was linked to the rapidly developing network by the Eastern Railroad in 1838. The road was extended to Ipswich in 1839 and Portsmouth, NH, in 1840. This enabled convenient direct rail access to raw materials and alternative markets.

The Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company

Despite a politically unpopular attempt in 1826 to manufacture cotton cloth in Salem³, progressive thinking encouraged entrepreneurs to follow the example of Lowell and incorporate the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company in 1839. Built on Stage Point opposite Derby Wharf, the mills remained in operation at that location until 1953. Production started in 1847 and lasted for 106 years. Following the trend of many northern businesses, the company moved south for economic reasons. The Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, owner of the Pequot brand name, acquired the assets and liabilities of Indian Head Mills Inc., in February 1955. It assumed the corporate name Indian Head Mills, Inc., and began operating at its facilities in Alabama and South Carolina.⁴

Located just a few feet above sea level, the Naumkeag plant was initially powered by a 400-horsepower steam engine.⁵ This was both feasible and convenient, thanks to Salem's access to the coasting trade that could cheaply deliver large quantities of coal originating in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Canada. In time Salem became a significant port of delivery for coal. The Essex



Railroad provided access to the industries of Lawrence in 1848, and service to Lowell followed in 1850, when the Salem and Lowell route operated from the coal terminal at Phillips Wharf, presently occupied by the Salem Harbor Generating Station.

Clive Jarvis, author of *The Story of Pequot*, a short corporate history and explanation of its manufacturing processes, credits Captain Nathaniel Griffin (1796-1876) of Salem as the prime mover in the establishment of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company. “Almost single handed, Nathaniel Griffin, a retired ship master, raised the sum of half a million dollars (stupendous in those days!) and the mill rose on its site along the water front at Stage Point on the South River directly opposite the historic Derby Wharf.”⁶

Born in Annisquam, Nathaniel Griffin came to Salem in 1810 to learn the sailmaker’s trade. He shipped as sailmaker aboard the Salem privateer *Grand Turk* in December 1814 and returned with \$157 as his share of prize money. From 1815 through 1835, he sailed to the East Indies, Europe, South America, and the cotton ports of Charleston and New Orleans. Some of the voyages incorporated elements of the “cotton triangle.” In 1821 he sailed as mate in the *Eliza & Mary*, with Captain William Story to Pernambuco, Brazil, then to St. Petersburg, Russia, and returned to Salem via New York as master after Captain Story left the ship at Gothenburg, Sweden, on other business.⁷ Captain Griffin noted that in December 1830 he had the opportunity to ride the first railroad opened for passenger service from Liverpool to Manchester, England, during one of his voyages. He engaged in the freighting business as master of the brig *Neptune* from New York to New Orleans, from there carrying cotton to Liverpool, and returned to Charleston to load another shipment of cotton. In the *Neptune*, he subsequently visited Sumatra for a cargo of pepper in 1832. He retired from the sea in 1835 and from 1836 to 1844 operated a ship chandlery at the corner of Union and Derby Streets.

George Granville Putnam quotes a number of entries from an autobiography written by Captain Griffin for his children. Not given to long-winded self-adulation, Captain Griffin sums up his on-shore business and civic accomplishments in a single paragraph: “May 8, 1845, was chosen clerk and treasurer of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, then organized for business, and continued

in that service until January, 1847. Served as alderman from March, 1845, to March, 1846. Chosen a director of Salem Turnpike. 1848, continued to fill various offices in the same, including president and superintendent, until October, 1860. Nothing further of note occurred up to the time of this writing, at the age of 73 years.”⁸ Putnam also notes that Captain Griffin’s grandson, Nathaniel Griffin Simonds, was treasurer of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company at the time of the writing of *Salem Vessels and Their Voyages*.⁹ Mr. Simonds joined the company in 1862, became treasurer in 1896, and continued in that capacity until 1926.¹⁰

Evidently Captain Griffin had plenty of practical experience in sizing up the potential for establishing a cotton manufactory. He observed a thriving industry in England and in nearby New England cities, a worldwide market, and a huge American source of raw material. His appreciation for the potential of railroads, knowledge of the logistics of bulk freight transport by sea, and the extension of the Eastern Railroad from Boston to Salem in 1838 brought all the pieces together for a successful industrial venture. Griffin also seems to have had a talent for raising funds.

Construction of the mills began in June 1845.¹¹ Carding and weaving were operational in 1847, with 29,696 spindles and 642 looms employing six hundred people and producing five million yards of cotton cloth a year.¹²

The project engineer for the mill (and later, Senator) was Colonel Charles Tillinghast James (1805-1862) of Rhode Island, who had extensive experience in constructing steam-powered mills. At the completion of the Naumkeag mill, Colonel James stated that the complete building cost was \$621,199.¹⁰¹³

Salem Cloth in Africa

David Pingree (1795-1863), merchant, ship owner, president of the Naumkeag Bank, and Mayor of Salem in 1851, was the first president of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company. He was succeeded by Edward D. Kimball (1811-1867), also a Salem merchant and ship owner. Both of these men were also active in the African trade, their ships going to West Africa or Zanzibar. It seems to be somewhat more than coincidental that one of the products most in demand in Africa was American cotton cloth, which was traded for hides, ivory, and particularly gum copal, a resin used in varnish. This connection allowed another new industry to flourish in Salem, Jonathan Whipple’s gum copal processing works at the foot of Turner Street.

The Africans prized the fine quality cotton sheeting. They called it ‘Merican (American cloth). A specific example is taken from the outward manifest of the brig *Ganges* of Salem for October 5, 1839. Among a mixed cargo is found an entry for four cases (4,505 ½ yards) of bleached shirting valued at \$527.11.¹⁴

The primary (later, exclusive) product of Naumkeag Mills, was cotton sheeting. The company grew steadily. By the turn of the 20th century more than 2,700 looms were in operation weaving Pequot sheets, and in 1909 the Danvers Bleachery became part of the Naumkeag operation. The mills were Salem's largest employer and, in turn, provided jobs for immigrants from Ireland, French Canada, and Poland and Eastern Europe.

But disaster struck on June 25, 1914. The mill complex, then consisting of twenty buildings, perished in the great Salem fire.

The effect of the mills on Salem's economy was critical. The mills were heavily insured and reconstruction began right away. By February 1916, the Naumkeag Steam (in name only, the new plant was powered by electricity) Cotton Mills, now consolidated into a more efficient layout, were up and running, larger than ever. The facility, then called Pequot Mills, survived labor disputes prior to World War Two, but post-war changes to the national economy pointed the way toward the relocation of northern textile plants to the south. By 1953 the mills were silent. The structures were adapted for office, warehousing, sales and manufacturing functions. The old mill buildings, now rehabilitated and painted white, still dominate the scene along the South River channel across from Derby Wharf. The area is now called Shetland Park, under the management of Shetland Properties, Inc.

In a recent conversation with one of Salem's oldest residents, I asked what he most vividly remembered about the mills from his youth. He spoke of the many Polish women of his Derby Street neighborhood who worked at the mills and of the coal barges delivering their cargoes. When asked how the raw cotton arrived at the mills, he recalled beautifully groomed four or six-horse teams pulling long, flat wagons carrying huge, upended, burlap wrapped cotton bales from the railroad terminal.¹⁵

An image, gone forever.



Left: Advertisement for Merritt & Co.'s freight line. This company hauled cotton bales from the railroad station to the Naumkeag (later Pequot) Mill. They were also responsible for transporting finished cloth.



Salem Maritime National Historic Site
174 Derby Street
Salem, MA 01970
<http://www.nps.gov/sama>

Notes

¹ J. Smith Homans and J. Smith Homans Jr., ed., *Cyclopedia of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (New York, 1858), vol. 1, p. 442.

² J. R. McCulloch, Esq., *A Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical, and Historical, of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (Philadelphia, 1840), vol. 1, p. 522. "Whitney's invention came into operation in 1793, and in 1794, 1,601,760 lbs., and, in 1795, 5,276,300 lbs. of cotton were exported. And so astonishing has been the growth of cotton in the interval, that the exports from the United States in 1837 amounted to the prodigious quantity of 444,211,537 lbs.! of which 438, 924, 566 lbs. were upland!" [Upland, also known as short stapled, is the most common American variety. It was thought not profitable to grow as long as the separation of the seeds had to be done by hand.]

³ C. H. Webber and W. S. Nevins, *Old Naumkeag: An Historical Sketch of the City of Salem, and the Towns of Marblehead, Peabody, Beverly, Danvers, Wenham, Manchester, Topsfield, and Middleton* (Salem, 1877), p. 205

⁴ Joan Kiplinger, "Indian Head Remembered: Revisiting An American Institution," p. 9, 10. URL: <http://www.fabrics.net/joan403.asp>

⁵ Webber and Nevins, p.205

⁶ Clive Jarvis, *The Story of Pequot* (Boston, 1929), p. 28

⁷ Captain William Story had been master of the ship *Friendship* of Salem and a Marblehead merchant. He retired from the Salem Custom House in 1853.

⁸ George Granville Putnam, *Salem Vessels and their Voyages: A History of the Pepper Trade with the Island of Sumatra*, Series I (Salem, 1924), p. 60

⁹ Putnam, p. 55

¹⁰ J. Foster Smith, *Sketches About Salem People* (Salem, 1930), p.11

¹¹ Webber and Nevins, p. 205

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Smith, p.12

¹⁴ Joseph B. Hoyt, "Salem's West Africa Trade, 1835-1863, And Captain Victor Francis Debaker," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* (January 1966), p. 46

¹⁵ Conversation, August 25, 2004, with Mr. Frank Zdanowicz, age 92.

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