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The Restoration of the Port of Philadelphia, 1783-1789

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cluded the United States of America. Admiral Denman, commander in chief in that region, probably reflected the general naval view when he advised the Admiralty that it would not be economically or technically worthwhile to defend such vulnerable bases as Vancouver Island.⁵⁸

In the event of war the navy would probably have sent most of its ships to the Australian colonies at the southwestern corner of the Pacific where it could not only defend a relatively secure base but could also protect part of the valuable commercial trade that flowed between these colonies and the United Kingdom. For this reason, no doubt, the Admiralty, while maintaining adamantly its views about colonial responsibility for local defense, nevertheless took a considerable practical interest in such defense measures as were undertaken by the colonies.⁵⁹

Underlying all theories of Imperial defense, however, was the ineradicable conviction that the important battles of survival would still be fought in the traditional European and Atlantic waters. When combined with the perennial pressure for naval economy imposed by government and much public opinion, such an attitude could not easily reconcile itself to claims that the remote and economically marginal areas of the Pacific could materially influence the outcome of any major war, once it had started. On the other hand a defeat at home for England meant 'ruin to her commerce, stoppage of food and supplies and of intercourse with India and her colonies.'⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Denman to Admiralty, 3 June 1865, P.R.O., Adm. 1/5924.

⁵⁹ In addition to works mentioned in footnote no. 7, see, on this subject, B. A. Knox, 'Colonial Influence on Imperial Policy, 1858-1866: Victoria and the Colonial Naval Defence Act, 1865,' *Historical Studies*, XI (1963), 61-79, and R. A. Shields, 'Australian Opinion and Defence of the Empire: A study in Imperial Relations 1880-1900,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, X (1964), 41-53.

⁶⁰ Memorandum, 19 September 1866, on need for ironclads in event of war with France, P.R.O., Adm. 1/5977.

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The Restoration of the Port of Philadelphia, 1783-1789

BY GEORGE W. GEIB

IT is customary to view the 1780's as a decade of significant urban growth in the United States. In the words of one historian, 'American cities . . . grew rapidly, some of them amazingly, despite the dislocation and destruction caused by war.'¹ Such growth can be documented by reference to such developments as new construction, expanded population, and new business ventures. Philadelphia, for example, witnessed the construction of hundreds of buildings, saw its population expand by several thousand, and provided the base for the new commercial activities of Robert Morris and his circle.² Hand in hand with this general pattern of growth went a closely allied development: the drive to restore urban public and private services curtailed or halted during the War for Independence, chief among them the facilities of the port of Philadelphia.

The port of Philadelphia was the city's window upon the world. More than merely an economic entrepôt through which much of the trade of the middle states passed, the port provided the primary means through which the city maintained contact with the political, religious, and intellectual developments of the larger Atlantic community. Developments that impaired the maritime commerce of Philadelphia threatened its development in the broadest possible sense.

Despite the vital importance of its ocean commerce, however, Philadelphia was not well situated to serve as a port. Unlike such cities as Boston and New York, Philadelphia was located not upon the sea but upon a river over fifty miles from the Atlantic. Admittedly, the Delaware was not a dangerous river. It was not given to severe floods, it did not contain insurmountable navigation hazards, and it was wide and deep enough to

¹ M. Jensen, *The New Nation* (New York, 1950), p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

accommodate any eighteenth-century vessel. But the names of its chief features—Mud Island, Reedy Island, Marcus Hook, Cross Ledge Shoals—bespoke the expanses of gravel, mud, and sand that could ground the unwary captain who sailed the river without a trained pilot and proper channel markers.

Recognizing these problems, local leaders had lavished considerable prewar effort upon improving the facilities of the ill-defined 'port of Philadelphia'—a label most took to include not only the city wharves but also the anchorage and the entire navigable length of the Delaware River. The colonial 'port' was supervised by a special provincial board that used local tonnage duties to maintain a variety of aids to navigation, including a lighthouse at Cape Henlopen, buoys and beacons in the main channel, regulations for apprenticing and licensing pilots, and a health officer and quarantine hospital to prevent the introduction of epidemic diseases.³

By 1775 the three miles of city waterfront were lined by ninety wharves and docks, most of them wooden frames filled with sand and stone. The majority were privately owned, but public wharves with strictly regulated charges stood at the end of most of the city's east-west streets. At least 1,000 vessels a year could be comfortably accommodated, provided they avoided the river ice that formed each winter.⁴

The War for Independence, however, had led to the temporary loss of most of these aids to navigation. Obvious considerations of defense against British warships and privateers in 1775 had forced the province to extinguish the lighthouse at Cape Henlopen, to remove the buoys and beacons that marked the main shoals and islands, and to obstruct the main river channels with 'chevaux-de-frise'—iron tipped wooden hazards designed to hole vessels that ran afoul of them, thereby giving shore batteries a chance to sink them.⁵

Such hazards did not stop the flow of commerce into the city completely. The British, for example, supplied themselves largely by sea after capturing the city and the downriver patriot forts late in 1777. Patriots, needing supplies and desiring privateering profits, had similarly used the port after reoccupying the city in 1778. The polacre *Victorious*, whose cargo of flour was a storm center in the city's wartime price-fixing controversies,

³ J. T. Mitchell and H. Flanders, comps., *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1809* (n.p., 1896-1915), VIII, 264-83, 423-24.

⁴ C. Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt* (New York, 1955), pp. 39, 247; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Division of Public Records, *Wardens of the Port of Philadelphia*, Minute Book, 1783-89.

⁵ W. H. Egle, J. B. Linn, and G. E. Reed, eds., *The Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series* (Harrisburg, 1879-90), I, 751-56, 768-69.

was among the ships that sailed safely in and out during the war years.⁶ But, as a number of petitions to the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania in 1784 attest, the wartime obstructions and the absence of navigation aids did have the effect of 'slowing the commerce' of the port, of causing 'numerous accidents' to the ships that wended their way through the shallows and chevaux-de-frise, and of creating unnecessary 'impositions upon trade.' Action had to be taken if Philadelphia was not to risk losing portions of its trade to rival ports.⁷ It was this situation that produced a concerted five-year attempt to restore and expand Philadelphia's port facilities.

The Pennsylvania Assembly took the first steps toward restoration of the port. Early in 1784 it established a new seven-member board of wardens, vested with all of the prewar board's powers over wharves, pilots, health, and aids to navigation. The Assembly also enacted a new navigation duty designed to help meet the board's expenses, and gave the board the new powers to approve the construction of additional wharves in the city and its suburbs and to charge heavier fines on ships that overstayed their allotted time at the public wharves. Finally, in an attempt to attract more of the coasting trade to the city, the Assembly exempted from tonnage duties all vessels under fifty tons and all vessels that had paid duties at the port within the last twelve months. The seven new wardens, named in the 1784 act, reflected the importance attached to the port by the Assembly. Unlike the rather obscure men normally elected to other local commissions, these wardens included ship captain Joseph Blewer, militia leader Benjamin Eyre, and such leading merchants as Andrew Caldwell and Francis Gurney.⁸

The records of this reconstituted board of wardens bespeak tremendous effort even when compared to such other busy local groups as the street commissioners. Where the Philadelphia street commission, for example, met weekly, the wardens of the port met daily (Sundays excepted) for the rest of the 1780's. Moreover, where the street commission still had most of the colonial public works to build upon, the port wardens had little to start with except the public wharves and the abandoned lighthouse.⁹

⁶ See, for example: W. Mishoff, 'Business in Philadelphia During the British Occupation, 1777-1778,' *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LXI (1937), 165-81; H. Cummings, 'Robert Morris and the Episode of the Polacre *Victorious*,' *PMHB*, LXX (1946), 239-57.

⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series*, I, 757; S. Hazard, ed., *The Pennsylvania Archives, First Series* (Philadelphia, 1852-56), X, 208, 212, 221.

⁸ *Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series*, III, 694; *Statutes at Large*, XI, 149-51, 320-30; Philadelphia, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Society for the Relief of Distressed Masters of Ships, Their Widows and Orphans, *Minute Book*.

⁹ Port Warden *Minute Book*, 1783-89.

The wardens made the removal of the chevaux-de-frise their first activity. Acting upon orders issued by the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, the board employed surveyors to chart the channels south of the city and determine the current location of the obstacles. The board then advertised in the local newspapers asking for contractors to remove the worst of them. When that appeal brought only an offer from an unemployed artisan who was willing to 'supervise' the work for a guinea a day, the board conducted a six-month search to find contractors to do the work.¹⁰

The men the board finally found, Levi Hollingsworth and Arthur Donaldson, were given nine months and £4,000 with which to do the job. The money was to be paid in installments as the work progressed, and the profits to the two men were to be that portion of the £4,000 left to them after expenses. Hiring an old hulk, and working almost until winter ice closed the river in 1784, they and their crew accomplished the task by the tiresome means of anchoring the hulk, grappling for the obstacles, and winching them aboard the hulk one by one after cutting off any posts sunk in the riverbed. The work was completed ahead of schedule, and the contractors left only one dangerous post in the channels. If one is to believe their letters to the board of wardens, however, the two men made little profit on the project.¹¹

While the contractors struggled within sight of the city, other workers hired by the wardens went to work further south. The Cape Henlopen lighthouse was improved to keep shifting sands from endangering its foundations, a keeper was found who was willing to endure the loneliness of the place, and advertisements were soon published proclaiming that the light was 'fixed . . . for the benefit of naval commanders.' Simultaneously, the wardens purchased a small sloop from part of a special appropriation of £1,900 given them by the Pennsylvania Assembly to replace the remainder of the old aids to navigation. The sloop's crew quickly placed beacons at Cape May and at Cross Ledge Shoals; set buoys to mark the channels in the river and Delaware Bay; set piers at Reedy Island and Muddy Island to tie up ships caught by winds, tides, or ice; and set moorings off their pilot station on Delaware Bay.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 1784; *Pennsylvania Archives, First Series*, X, 94, 144-45; S. Hazard, ed., *Pennsylvania Colonial Records* (Harrisburg and Philadelphia, 1838-53), XIII, 595, 637, XIV, 58, 73, 500-01.

¹¹ Port Warden Minute Book, 1784; *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, XIV, 105, 119, 199-200, 212, 241; *Pennsylvania Archives, First Series*, X, 606-08, 649; *Second Series*, I, 758-67, 770-73.

¹² Port Warden Minute Book, 1783-85; *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, XIV, 78-79, 212; *Pennsylvania Archives, First Series*, X, 571-72, 580, 588-89; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 12 February, 15 July, 3 August, 9 September 1785, 26 July, 30 November 1785.

The wardens next purchased land on the southern tip of Cape May in New Jersey, drew plans for a new lighthouse on that site, and induced the State Supreme Executive Council to ask the State of New Jersey for permission to construct the new building. The State quarantine hospital south of the city was refurbished, and two local physicians were named as health officers to put prewar contagion rules back into effect. Construction of a new public wharf was approved in the southern suburb of Southwark, and a number of river pilots were apprenticed and subsequently licensed.¹³

The desire for port improvements also led the State Assembly in 1784 to award the only State patent of the 1780's to Arthur Donaldson for his 'Hippopotamus,' a primitive dredge designed to remove the accumulations of gravel that constantly formed in the slow, shallow water along the wharves and docks of the city. Donaldson had built an earlier 'Hippopotamus' in 1774, but it had been torn apart during the 1778 occupation by British soldiers who wished to sell its ironwork. Now the inventor was given exclusive rights to his second model, a seven-year monopoly to clean docks in the port, and the right to sell sand or gravel removed from the river or bay (whether by his device or not).¹⁴ However, to judge from the protests of 'A Shallop Man' in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, who suggested that 'snapping turtles' could do a better job of 'lifting the mud' at the docks, the 'Hippopotamus' may have left something to be desired.¹⁵

Most ambitious of all the new port authority projects was the wardens' drive to build piers at Marcus Hook, a prominent point about half way down the river. In a river often threatened by Atlantic storms and closed by ice for anytime up to twelve weeks in the winter, an unwary vessel could easily be trapped and damaged by adverse weather. To prevent such dangers from frightening away captains, the wardens felt that new mooring sites were essential to protect ships that were caught by storm or ice.¹⁶

When the board advertised for contractors at least three firms offered their services. Thomas Connaroe, a local builder, was awarded the £4,100 contract. Although the details of his work have not survived, it presumably conformed to the State's request for piers resting upon pine or oak pilings and extending from the shore at Marcus Hook to the edge of the

¹³ Port Warden Minute Book, 1783-86; *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, XIV, 378; *Pennsylvania Archives, First Series*, XI, 93; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 10 September 1787.

¹⁴ *Statutes at Large*, IX, 411-15.

¹⁵ *Independent Gazetteer*, 23 July 1785.

¹⁶ J. T. Scharf and T. Westcott, *History of Philadelphia: 1609-1884* (Philadelphia, 1884), I, 438.

main navigable channel. The construction of the piers, apparently delayed by bad weather and primitive construction methods, lasted over eighteen months. Successfully completed in early 1787, it was another achievement for the port wardens.¹⁷

Such achievements become all the more notable when viewed in light of the wardens' continuing administrative difficulties. If space taken up in the commission's minute books is any indication, the worst of these problems was personnel. Life on the river was often lonely and arduous, and good workers often could not be found to maintain the wardens' properties. In this regard, the most vocal offender proved to be lighthouse keeper James Hargis. A surly individual whom the wardens once chided for putting his personal 'convenience' above service at the lighthouse, Hargis was far from efficient. He twice provoked indignant protests from ship captains who found his light out in the early morning hours, and he frequently ran short of oil and other supplies. But he was always willing to send demands to the wardens about issues ranging from requests for higher pay and a full-time assistant to charges for storm damage to his dinghy.¹⁸

But such employees as Hargis were, legally at least, under the authority of the wardens. Others who worked on the Delaware River were not always under such restrictions. In 1787, for example, the wardens were forced to concede that their pilot regulations did not apply to citizens of the State of Delaware. At once competition between pilots from Pennsylvania and Delaware took place until, by undisclosed means, the wardens secured Delaware's assent for the port regulations later in that same year.¹⁹

The worst case of uncooperative behavior appeared in December of 1786 when the wardens learned to their chagrin that a Spanish frigate had moored just above Marcus Hook, anchored at a place where advancing pack ice was sure to drive it into Connaroe's uncompleted construction work. Connaroe, it appeared, had unsuccessfully pleaded with the frigate captain to move the vessel. Worse still, the ship was manned by a crew that so frightened the inhabitants of the area that some even petitioned the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council to guarantee their safety. So delicate was the situation that it became necessary for the Council, presided over by the venerable Benjamin Franklin, to hurry off a series of apologetic letters asking the unnamed captain to restrain his crew and

¹⁷ Port Warden Minute Book, 1785-89; *Pennsylvania Colonial Records*, XIV, 458, 460, 474-75, 479, XV, 228, 233; *Pennsylvania Archives, First Series*, X, 713-14, XI, 99.

¹⁸ Port Warden Minute Book, 1783-88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1787.

offering him suggestions designed to save his vessel from the approaching ice. For several tense days the frigate captain maintained a stony silence, and then, just before ice closed the river, sailed out of Delaware Bay.²⁰

Even more serious for the wardens than the lack of individual cooperation was the failure of Philadelphia's foreign trade to expand significantly during the postwar years. From 1784 until the end of the Confederation period in 1789 the port wardens were empowered to charge tonnage duties upon all vessels that entered the port: seven cents a ton on American-owned shipping, fourteen cents a ton on foreign-owned shipping. The wardens' resulting tonnage reports (summarized in Tables I and II)²¹ suggest that foreign trade did not significantly expand during the period. Instead, both the average monthly number of vessels and the average monthly tonnage of those vessels remained rather constant during the 1780's, at approximately fifty ships and 5,000 tons, respectively.

Several factors probably contributed to Philadelphia's static foreign trade. The first was the relative inaccessibility of the port city. Despite the improvements that the wardens had made, Philadelphia was still harder to reach and more liable to be closed by winter ice than any other major port of the middle states. Considerations of safety and convenience may well have influenced captains to shun the river port. A second and more serious contributing factor was the absence of increasing demand for Philadelphia's products in Europe in the 1780's. With no important war to increase demand in the countries to which the city's exports normally went, Philadelphia was not likely to see its commerce increase once the normal peacetime level of demand had been reached in 1783 and 1784. The third, and perhaps the most important, factor was the rise of the port of Baltimore. Closer to the West Indies and easier of access from the sea, Baltimore entered a remarkable period of growth in the 1780's—drawing much of its trade from central and western Pennsylvania. With the loss of much of the trade of its agricultural hinterland, Philadelphia's foreign trade potential was further reduced.²²

The resulting volume of foreign trade was high enough to justify the aids to navigation the wardens had installed, and nobody questioned seriously the wisdom of maintaining these services. But the volume of trade was not enough to justify further expansion. When the first postwar port statutes were reconfirmed by the state government in 1788, the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1786; *Pennsylvania Archives, First Series*, XI, 99-101.

²¹ Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Division of Public Records, *Wardens of the Port of Philadelphia, Tonnage Receipt Books*.

²² D. T. Gilchrist, ed., *The Growth of the Seaport Cities* (Charlottesville, 1967), 54-82, finds a similar pattern in Philadelphia after 1790.

THE PORT OF PHILADELPHIA

TABLE I

NUMBER OF ENTRIES BY MONTH OF AMERICAN VESSELS AT THE
PORT OF PHILADELPHIA

	1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789
January		11	5	23	2	4
February		9	12	9	0	3
March		23	29	22	34	0
April		40	34	28	36	6
May		53	45	38	38	44
June		25	28	36	28	33
July		25	30	29	31	48
August		30	29	22	28	19
September	30	36	36	31	40	
October	31	44	38	34	29	
November	28	30	28	32	38	
December	28	45	8	17	31	
Total	117	371	322	310	335	157

NUMBER OF ENTRIES BY MONTH OF FOREIGN VESSELS AT THE
PORT OF PHILADELPHIA

	1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789
January		9	0	18	4	4
February		3	3	1	1	1
March		6	1	8	12	0
April		26	25	26	33	3
May		31	27	36	41	38
June		34	31	29	26	41
July		27	33	25	33	33
August		51	39	38	40	21
September	35	34	34	22	25	
October	36	32	35	20	35	
November	24	29	37	14	32	
December	25	29	9	8	7	
Total	120	311	274	245	289	141
Grand Total	237	692	596	566	624	298
Monthly Average	59	58	49	47	52	42

THE PORT OF PHILADELPHIA

TABLE II

TONNAGE BY MONTH OF AMERICAN VESSELS ENTERED AT THE
PORT OF PHILADELPHIA

	1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789
January		940	544	2,091	250	376
February		1,035	895	831	0	312
March		1,911	2,125	1,787	2,197	0
April		3,434	3,084	3,037	1,986	706
May		4,359	4,767	4,440	3,681	4,543
June		1,947	2,828	2,872	2,117	3,542
July		2,478	3,000	2,616	3,007	4,330
August		1,817	2,852	2,825	2,262	1,477
September	3,010	3,259	3,976	3,004	4,858	
October	2,285	4,575	3,678	2,789	3,081	
November	3,290	2,517	2,633	3,137	3,977	
December	2,125	4,187	1,760	1,793	3,043	
Total	10,710	32,460	32,142	31,222	30,459	15,286

TONNAGE BY MONTH OF FOREIGN VESSELS ENTERED AT THE
PORT OF PHILADELPHIA

	1784	1785	1786	1787	1788	1789
January		770	0	2,005	319	518
February		390	390	35	34	236
March		434	40	743	1,324	0
April		2,673	1,761	2,786	3,749	278
May		3,500	2,115	3,308	4,797	6,003
June		2,880	2,117	3,141	2,479	4,577
July		2,529	2,435	2,839	3,546	3,014
August		4,566	4,405	4,157	4,032	2,179
September	3,012	2,495	2,393	3,389	2,288	
October	3,790	3,895	3,168	2,387	4,737	
November	2,090	2,685	3,353	1,930	4,902	
December	2,260	2,775	885	1,191	1,029	
Total	11,152	29,592	23,062	27,911	33,236	16,805
Grand Total	21,862	62,052	55,204	59,133	63,695	32,091
Monthly Average	5,465	5,170	4,600	4,925	5,310	4,585

Supreme Executive Council took the opportunity to name four new port wardens, a majority of the board. Upon taking office these men promptly rejected the plans for the Cape May lighthouse and then took no further on such other proposed improvements as additional beacons and buoys.²³ The drive to restore the port of Philadelphia in the 1780's thus came to an abrupt end.

Despite the active support of the state government, major exertions by the wardens and many of their employees, the restoration of all prewar services, and the construction of several new public works, the port failed to match the internal development of Philadelphia. Static trade and abandoned expansion plans are significant exceptions to the general pattern of urban growth in the 1780's.

²³ Port Warden *Minute Book*, 1788-89.

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EXTRACT FROM THE LOG OF THE SHIP *Lawrence Brown*, NEW
ZEALAND TO INDIA, 31 DECEMBER 1863

'At eight bells [midnight] we strike 16,—8 for the Old Year and 8 for the New.'

GILBERT R. PAYSON

Roosevelt, the Navy, and the Venezuela Controversy: 1902-1903

BY RONALD SPECTOR

FEW controversies in American History have enjoyed such vitality as the dispute over the role played by President Theodore Roosevelt in the so-called Venezuelan Claims Controversy of 1902. As Howard K. Beale, one of the ablest of Roosevelt scholars points out, far more is involved in this controversy than merely the question of the President's role in the settlement of the Claims Dispute. 'Upon its solution hangs Roosevelt's reputation for veracity . . . This debunking of one of Roosevelt's proudest achievements, more perhaps than any other factor, has become the basis for a growing conviction popular and professional that Roosevelt was something of a fraud . . . that he invented happenings or doctored stories of his part in historic events.'¹

The episode itself grew out of an attempt by the British and German governments (later joined by the Italians) to forcibly collect debts owed to their citizens by the Venezuelan government. After dispatching an ultimatum to the Venezuelans, the British and Germans sank or captured the gunboats of the Venezuelan Navy and bombarded Venezuelan territory. The South American government still refused to yield, urging that the dispute be submitted to arbitration. From December 1902 to February 1903, the powers established a formal blockade of Venezuela and German warships, on two occasions, bombarded Venezuelan territory. Finally, in the spring of 1903, the disputants agreed to establish mixed claims commissions to settle the controversy and to refer any unsettled questions to the Hague Tribunal.

The whole affair would undoubtedly have been long since forgotten but for the sensational claim which Theodore Roosevelt, in 1916, made to William R. Thayer, the biographer of John Hay. Roosevelt told

¹ Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore, 1956), p. 402.