

Alexandria and the Flowering of the Flour Trade: 1801-1817

Leisurely strolling around the newly renovated King Street Park along the Potomac River in old town Alexandria, it is hard to imagine this was once a bustling international port. Sloops, brigs, barques and schooners from Great Britain, China, Spain, Portugal, France, Russia, the Netherlands, and Jamaica often anchored side-by-side, colorful flags snapping in the wind, rigging tapping against masts, sails furled.



One observer recorded that there was seldom less than 20 square-rigged vessels at port, discharging or loading goods to or from large warehouses that lined the waterfront: Scottish wool, Belgian linen, French and Italian silk, Chinese tea, Spanish port and Madeira, spices and fruits from the West Indies, and furniture from England.

The town was conceived as a competitor to Dumfries, settled by Scots downriver specializing in the tobacco trade. A tobacco warehouse on Hunting Creek, south of Alexandria's old town, and a good harbor, sufficiently deep to accommodate ocean-going ships of the day, which neighboring Georgetown lacked, prompted local landowners to have the village laid out in 1749. The site was called Belle Haven but officially took the name of two of the original land patent holders, John and Philip Alexander.

By the 1770's Alexandria had become a major flour exporter. The port was fed by roads from Fredericksburg and the Middle Turnpike, a.k.a Route 7/ Leesburg Pike. Conestoga wagons delivered wheat and flour from as far west as the Shenandoah valley. Little River Turnpike would increase traffic in the early 1800's as did the construction of canals around Great and Little Falls that allowed for cheaper water transport down the Potomac.



The booming wheat and flour trade may have been a factor propelling William Shephard and Philip Carper to build and operate the Colvin Run merchant mill. Farmers would sell their wheat to millers, and millers would negotiate with jobbers or dealers in Alexandria. The dealers would either sell the flour to foreign buyers or have it baked into biscuits and bread and stuffed

into barrels for export.

The period of 1801-1815 is considered the high point of the flour trade in Alexandria when about 1,155,000 barrels of flour were exported. Half of the shipments went to the "Spanish Peninsula," a third to the West Indies, and the rest to England, Ireland and other destinations. Shipments varied, in part depending upon harvests in America and Great Britain. A more intriguing factor causing fluctuations was the politics of war and peace.

At the turn of the century rumors of peace between feuding Great Britain and France depressed flour prices. One Alexandria merchant groused that a “little more hustle about war would have a good effect on the price of flour.” The tide was with him. British troops together with their Spanish and Portuguese allies fought to repel Napoleon’s attempted invasion of the Spanish (what we now call Iberian) Peninsula. The Peninsular War lasted from 1807 to 1814. Armies needed to be fed. Alexandria merchants met the call.

The tide turned when President Jefferson imposed a foreign trade embargo at the end of 1807 to protest naval harassment by Great Britain and France. This put a stopper to all recorded foreign trade. Wiley flour merchants found new outlets in Boston, Portsmouth and other New England towns. The sharp rise in coastwise trade aroused suspicion that rather than embarking on a gluten-rich diet, shrewd Yankee traders were shipping the flour onward to Canada and then overseas. The administration imposed a certificate requirement for all shipments. No certificates were issued, not even for transit from Georgetown to Alexandria!

The repeal of the embargo in 1809 witnessed a sharp uptick in flour exports. 1811 was the best year to date. Nearly 190,000 barrels of flour shipped out of Alexandria. When the United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, the tide was set to turn again, but not immediately.

Foreign demand for flour was positively going through the roof. Prices in Lisbon rocketed to \$12 and then \$22.5 a barrel. This contrasted with the \$8-10 Alexandria could purchase flour locally. Money to be made. And British troops required nourishment.

Necessity trumping principle, the British instituted a licensing system so foreign ships could deliver goods to the Peninsula. Alexandria merchants also rationalized that profits trumped principle, and willingly sold to the enemy. The situation could not hold. The British privy council put a stop to the practice, and a British blockade of the Chesapeake put an end to any shipments out of Alexandria.



Flour shipments from Alexandria resumed after the wars. In the year of June 1816 to June 1817 just over 200,000 barrels were shipped. That would stand as the record. New fields in the Midwest and the rise of other, competitive ports numbered the days of Alexandria as a major flour exporter.

When you next walk on King’s Park in old town, try to imagine the docks crowded with ships, sailors’ shouts, dockworkers’ grunts, and jobbers crying out bids to buy goods, the days when the flour trade was flowering in Alexandria.

