

1795 Tench Tilghman Letter

Letter opens door to Oxford and early American history

The recent acquisition by the Museum of an innocent letter from Spain to Baltimore in 1785 raises intriguing questions about the role that two famous Oxford contemporaries may have played in the formation of the American Navy and its first major victories on foreign shores. It will also challenge long-held assumptions about the relationship between these men of different backgrounds: Colonel Tench Tilghman, scion of an early Talbot County planter family and George Washington's honored aide-de-camp, and Robert Morris Jr., unacknowledged son of prominent Oxford merchant Robert Morris and the man called the "financier of the American revolution."

The letter, written in Barcelona by Valentin Riera, head of the prominent merchant/shipping company of the same name, was sent to "Tench Tilghman & Co, Merchants" in Baltimore, reaching Colonel Tench Tilghman within a year of his untimely death on April 18, 1786, at the age of 42. The letter, in English, refers to an ongoing personal and business relationship in which Tilghman shipped wheat, tobacco and other American products to Spain, and Riera shipped wine and manufactured products to Baltimore, using "bills of exchange" of their respective ships' cargoes. In essence, the two companies were both trading houses and banks, and were vital components of the growing commerce between the new United States and southern Europe while England and France remained unreliable competitors.

The heart of the letter, however, is Riera's lament that Tilghman had recently ceased to fill wheat orders, speculating that the price of wheat might be too high and that the "Moorish Corsairs" – pirates from the north African states centered in Tripoli – made it too dangerous for Tilghman's ships and those of other American companies to enter the Mediterranean. Riera put his request bluntly: "We hope the Congress of the United States will presume to put a stop to these dangerous consequences by some means or other, that you may have free trade in this side, and hope that when that period will come our correspondence will take a more favorable turn, with a reciprocal advantage; our market continues favorable to the disposal of wheat, and as our crops have a very (small) prospect, of course I shall want many supplies during the whole year."

The Corsairs, often called the Barbary Pirates, had been a growing problem for southern Europe for several centuries, capturing vessels for ransom and taking hostages from towns for slaves. Not stopping at Gibraltar, the pirates began attacking ships and towns all along the Atlantic coast. Spain, Portugal, Italy and other states had reluctantly adopted a policy of paying "tribute" to the various Barbary sultans for protection. From the beginnings of American colonial trade, the Spanish monarchs urged their major trading houses in Cadiz and Barcelona to engage in informal diplomacy with their American counterparts to encourage British protection for trans-Atlantic shipping. The newly-independent United States had turned to Mediterranean trade in earnest, and therefore offered the possibility that its navy would provide a potent force against the pirates.

The only problem, as Sr. Riera well knew, was that the U.S had no navy. Although the Continental Congress had authorized a navy in early 1774, it largely consisted of privateers, converted merchant ships, French loans, and a few captured warships. At the end of 1775, the Congress agreed after great debate to build 8 new warships, and then another 13 frigates in 1776, but not all were built and few saw much action during the revolution. However, several surprise victories against the British fleet gave Americans confidence and established its first naval hero, John Paul Jones, while also training new officers such as Stephen Decatur, who would soon lead America in actions abroad. But, deeply in debt, the Congress sold the last ship of the "continental navy" at auction in 1785, to a man named Robert Morris.

What Sr. Riera also knew was the fact that his appeal for naval protection was directed to the two men in America who could most influence the new Congress to fund a navy capable of such a task: Colonel Tench Tilghman and his business partner, Robert Morris.

Robert Morris and Tench Tilghman formed the partnership Tench Tilghman & Co. on January 1, 1784. It is not clear how much mercantile experience Tench had at that point or exactly when he first got to know Robert Morris. Most likely it was during the revolutionary war, although they could have met in the previous decade. When his family moved to Philadelphia from their farm "Fausley" near St. Michael's about 1760, Tench went to college there, graduating in 1764. He is believed to have engaged in several business ventures in the city with his uncle Tench Francis Jr. but his prominence was largely social, and in 1775 he joined the "silk stocking regiment" to fight in the revolution. Through family connections he was made Colonel, and came to the attention of General George Washington, where a lasting friendship led to his becoming Washington's aide-de-camp.

Robert Morris arrived in Oxford from Liverpool in 1744 at the age of 10 – the year of Tench's birth – and was sent almost immediately by his father, Robert Morris, Sr. to live with a family friend in Philadelphia. He was both tutored and went to school there, but his mathematical gifts got him apprenticed to the counting room of Charles Willing at the age of 16. The year was 1750. Robert Morris Sr. died by accident in Oxford that year, leaving his fortune to young Robert, who in 1752 created a mercantile partnership with Willing's son Thomas. In 1757, the two created a shipping-banking partnership called Willing, Morris and Company, which prospered in foreign trade and lasted until 1779.

Morris became quite wealthy and influential in Pennsylvania, representing it in the Continental Congress from 1775 to 1778 and signing for it the Articles of Confederation in 1778. His prominence in shipping and finance made him both a leader of critical committees of the Continental Congress and, through his firm and many contacts, the major supplier of arms, ammunition and ships to the revolution. He served on the Marine and Maritime committees, and headed the Secret Committee on Trade which smuggled war supplies from France and drafted with John Adams a treaty of free trade agreed with France in 1778. Morris profited in many ways from the war, including buying interests in many privateers and selling their spoils, but he claimed he lost over 150 ships, that this "private navy" harassed British shipping, moved Washington's army between crucial

battles, and, along with his personal notes, provided the flow of funds to pay the continental army and keep it provisioned.

By war's end, his personal debt was high, and his fortune strained. His various roles made him many critics and enemies, but solidified his respect and friendship from George Washington and the Congress. In 1781, the Congress created the first executive offices, and Morris was chosen to head two of the most important from 1781 to 1784: Agent of Marine (predecessor of the Revenue Marine in 1790) and Superintendent of Finance (Secretary of the Treasury after 1789). He proposed the establishment of a national Bank, a decimal currency, and many accounting reforms, as well as commitments to free trade. He was one of the most knowledgeable and influential men in the young government until about 1798.

During and after the war, Morris was personally engaged in many business ventures, as well as substantial litigation. Publication of many of his letters (*The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784*, edited by Elizabeth Nuxoll and Elmer Ferguson, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999) confirms that at the expiration of his term as Superintendent of Finance, he established the partnership Tench Tilghman & Co. as successor to his partnership with Willing. Through the new partnership he expanded his interests in trade to include Europe, Africa and Asia.

As a major trading partner in Spain and the Mediterranean, Valentin Riera clearly knew that he was speaking by letter directly to the two men who had the economic incentive, the experience, and the influence with the U.S. Congress and George Washington to get the funding for a navy, both for the defense of its new territory and for the defense of its foreign commerce, which was the young republic's lifeblood. On their part, Tilghman and Morris would have understood through Riera that Spain, officially neutral because paying tribute, would be nevertheless a welcome ally in actions against pirates off its coasts.

Did Tilghman and Morris lend active support for a new navy? If so, in what fashion? Tilghman himself had less than a year to live, and his business journal and personal letters have not yet been published, while Morris' published papers dated before Riera's letter contain few hints of any plans for a naval force to protect trade. The evidence so far is only circumstantial. Morris was well aware that the U.S. had no money for war ships, but also no money to pay tribute to the Barbary states for protection. Trouble was imminent.

What we clearly do know is that later in 1785, two American merchant ships were captured by Algiers; Thomas Jefferson urged the need for a naval force; Congress debated the costs of such a force in 1786 and 1791; and when Algiers captured 11 additional American merchant ships in 1793, Congress passed the Naval Act of 1794, commissioning the first 6 flagships of a new navy. In 1796, a peace accord was announced between the U.S. and Algiers – costing the U.S. \$800,000 in ransom money - - which stopped construction, but following intervention by President Washington, Congress authorized the launching of the first 3 ships, including the *U.S.S. Constitution*. Between 1797 and 1800, the ships were used in an undeclared naval war with France, but in 1801, the ruler of Tripoli declared war on American shipping, asking for triple the

tribute. The U.S. sent a small fleet commanded by Stephen Decatur, whose bold raids quickly pressured two of the Barbary states into peace accords, but the battle for Tripoli lasted until 1805, when Decatur attacked the city of Derna from the sea and by land with a small coalition force of Americans and other allies, capturing the city and forcing Tripoli to agree to permanent terms. This first victory on foreign soil is of course memorialized in the Marine hymn. The irony of the appearance of this letter and the unfolding of current events is obvious.

The letter and a transcription will be on permanent display in the Oxford Museum beginning with its opening on Oxford Day.

Larry Myers, 3/30/11