The Merchants LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers

by Lynne Belluscio

Herman LeRoy and William Bayard, Jr. went into business in 1788. Herman was 30 and Bayard was 27. Ultimately they would become one of the wealthiest merchant houses in New York. Their ships traveled around the world to bring cargos of trade goods back to New York. This past spring, the Historical Society received a couple copies of an 1800 newspaper from New York City. On the front page was a listing of merchandise available from LeRoy, Bayard & McEvers, at their merchant house on Washington Street in lower Manhattan.

The list of goods came from around the world: "Leghorn straw hats" probably came from England, but the straw may have come from Italy. They offered "Fresh Hyson Tea" and "Hyson Skin" which were types of green tea from China. "Souchong tea" was black tea. "Schiedam Gin" was from a region of Holland. "Teneriffe" wine came from the Island of Teneriffe which is the largest of the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa. The Canaries were the last port for many ships sailing west to the Americas. "Lisbon red port" wine came from Spain. Also there were a wide variety of textiles. "Estopillas" is a Spanish term for a variety of loose woven material, like cheesecloth."Coutets" (maybe Coutil) is a linen twill used for heavy aprons worn by distillers, brewers, waiters, and sometimes for making tents. "Osnaburghs" (Osnaburg) is a coarse unbleached linen or hempen cloth made in Osnabrick, Germany, and was often used for overalls and farmer's clothing popular in the United States. It was not as coarse as "Tocklenburghs", (Ticlenburg) made of hemp or linen. "Bretagnes" (Britannias) was a plain woven linen fabric made in Brittany and used for fine quality shirts. It was manufactured primarily for the American market. (I had to put out a call to a friend in Colonial Williamsburg to decipher the names of the textiles.) LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers also offered Petersburgh flour which was probably milled in Virginia. (George Washington knew of Petersburg flour). And the list included "English refined loaf sugar." The English grew sugar cane on islands in the Caribbean and it was processed into muscovado sugar which was shipped in huge barrels to England to be refined into hard sugar cones. (Granulated sugar was not available at this time.)

So it was difficult, thirteen years later, when the British navy set up blockades all along the east coast during the War of 1812. The New York harbor was closed from 1813 until 1815. Merchants like LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers were in a dire situation. They were out of business. The good news about the Treaty of Ghent which ended the War of 1812 reached New York City in February 1815. Every merchant house scrambled to get ships out of the port and on their way to foreign countries to buy cargo. Within days of the announcement of the treaty, twenty-one year old Jacob LeRoy was onboard one of his father's ships, the Emily, headed to Madras to beat out the competition and bring back a cargo of goods - - spices, tea, and yard goods. But there was more money to be had if they could import salt. It's easy to underestimate the importance of salt, but it was needed to preserve meat and fish. During the Revolutionary War, the need for salt was critical to keep the soldiers fed. The British did all they could do to cut off supplies and interrupt salt production. And this was the case during the War of 1812. In fact, it was the short supply of salt during the War of 1812, that propelled the need to seriously begin plans for the Erie Canal, which would connect the rich salt deposits in Syracuse to New York.

The merchants knew that they could make a lot of money if they could bring salt to New York. Last week, I bought a contract on Ebay, that was made on August 3, 1815, between LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers, and another merchant house, Fish and Grinnell. The contract was an agreement to send the 335-ton ship Cumberland to Turk Island for a cargo of salt and return to New York as quickly as possible. The contract confirmed the price of 30 cents a bushel. At that price, it was easy to see that salt was considered "white gold."

Turk Island was one of the southernmost islands in the Bahamas. Salt had been produced there for many generations in huge shallow ponds. As the water evaporated, the salt was raked from the edges and dried and put into barrels. As I was reading about Turk Island in Kurlansky's book "Salt", I learned that Caribbean, salt was the leading cargo carried to North America - - more tonnage than sugar, molasses or rum. And the leading cargo from North America to the Caribbean was salt cod, to feed slaves on sugar plantations. I don't know if the Cumberland was successful in bringing a cargo of salt back to New York, but I suspect so. But I do know that when the Erie Canal opened in 1825, the salt crisis was over.

Herman LeRoy and William Bayard were shrewd businessmen who knew the markets of the world. LeRoy would take the earnings from his merchant business and invest in land. His son Jacob would come to LeRoy and become the land agent. But the fortunes of the merchants failed to support future generations. Jacob LeRoy was overheard saying: "Property seldom remains in one family through many generations. Wealth begets pride and luxury. The children of the rich have expensive habits without industry and in the division of the father's estate and their portion insufficient for the paternal style and entail poverty upon their posterity."