

**FREE SHIPS. THE  
RESTORATION  
OF THE AMERICAN  
CARRYING TRADE**

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Free Ships. The Restoration of the American Carrying Trade by John Codman

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## FREE SHIPS.

### The Restoration of the American Carrying Trade.

It may seem surprising that an American House of Representatives should have been so ignorant of the meaning of a common word as to apply the term "commerce" to the carrying trade, when in the session of 1869 it commissioned Hon. John Lynch, of Maine, and his associated committee "to investigate the cause of the decadence of American commerce," and to suggest a remedy by which it might be restored.

But, it was not more strange than that this committee really appointed to look into the carrying trade to which the misnomer commerce was so inadvertently applied, should have entirely ignored its duty by constituting itself into an eleemosynary body for the bestowal of national charity upon shipbuilders. Its Report fell dead upon the floor of the House, and was so ridiculed in the Senate that when a motion was made to lay the bill for printing it upon the table, Mr. Davis, of Kentucky, suggested, as an amendment, that it be kicked under it. Nevertheless, the huge volume of irrelevant testimony was published for the benefit of two great home industries—paper making and printing.

The theory of this committee was that the Rebellion had destroyed another industry nearly as remote from the proper subject of inquiry as either of these. These gentlemen con-

cluded that shipbuilding was becoming extinct, because the Confederate cruisers had destroyed many of our ships—a reason ridiculously absurd, in view of the corollary that the very destruction of those vessels should have stimulated reproduction. Since that abortive attempt to steal bounties from the Treasury for the benefit of a favored class of mechanics, Government, occupied with matters deemed of greater importance, has totally neglected our constantly diminishing mercantile marine.

By refusing to repeal the law that represses it, it may truly be said that had every ingenuity been devised to accomplish its destruction, its tendency to utter annihilation could not have been more certainly assured than it has been by this obstinate neglect.

In the session of 1876, Senator Boutwell of Massachusetts renewed the proposition of Mr. Lynch, but his Bill was not called up in the Senate. In the course of intervening years a little more light may be presumed to have dawned upon Congress, and, therefore, it is to be regretted that the Senator did not obtain a hearing, in order that the fallacy of his argument might have been exposed.

If any one cares to study the origin of our restrictive navigation laws, he can consult a concise account of it given by Mr. David A. Wells, in the *North American Review*, of December, 1877. It came out of a compromise with slavery. The Northern States agreed that slavery should be "fostered"—that is a favorite word with protectionists—provided that shipbuilding should also be fostered, and that New England ships—for nearly all vessels were built in that

district—should have the sole privilege of supplying the Southern market with negroes!

That sort of slavery being now happily at an end, shipbuilders still inherit the spirit of their guild, merely transferring the wrong they perpetrated on black men by binding all their white fellow citizens with the bonds of their odious monopoly. Moreover, although the arbitrary law of the mother country forcing the colonists to conduct their commerce in British built ships was one exciting cause of the Revolutionary Rebellion, Americans had no sooner obtained their independence than they created a monopoly quite as tyrannical among themselves. And yet, they were not then without excuse. At the time when the Convention for forming the Federal Constitution convened in 1789, every civilized nation was exercising a similar restrictive policy. But while all of them have either totally abolished or materially modified their stringent laws touching their shipping interests—America, “the land of the free,” the boasting leader of the world’s progress and enlightenment, stands alone sustaining this effete idea. She persists in maintaining an ordinance devised originally for the protection of the home industry of her shipbuilders, which has now become a most stalwart protection for the industry of every foreign shipowner whom we encourage in the transportation of our persons and property over the ocean—an industry in which this law forbids a similar class of her own citizens to participate!

Whatever may be the arguments in favor of, or opposed to, the protection of industries under the control of our own Government, none of them can apply to those pursued upon



an area which is the common property of the world. It is a proposition so evident that no words need be wasted in its demonstration, that, other things being equal, the cheapest and best ships, most adapted for the purpose, by whomsoever owned, will have preference in the carrying trade over the ocean. You may pile the duty, for instance, on iron, and grant bounties on the production of the American article if you please, to any extent; you may, if you choose, prohibit the importation of ploughs, and then assess farmers ten times the cost of their ploughs for the benefit of the home manufacturer. You would undoubtedly succeed in compelling them to purchase American ploughs. They must have them or starve, and we should all starve likewise if they did not use those protected ploughs to cultivate the soil. Indeed, in a less exaggerated way we are doing something very like this continually under the guise of "protecting home industry."

It is a legitimate business for the advocates of that doctrine. If they believe in it they are quite right in "trying it on," and in making the people at large pay as much as can possibly be got out of them for the benefit of a few.

But fortunately they cannot build a Chinese wall around the country. We are necessitated to have intercourse with other nations. We have a surplus of agricultural products to dispose of to them which they cannot pay for unless to a certain extent we take the merchandise they offer in exchange. This exchange, with all due respect to Mr. Lynch, his committee and the House of Representatives appointing those astute investigators, is commerce. The carrying

trade is the means whereby commerce is conducted, and this carrying trade, an industry once of vastly greater importance to our people than all shipbuilding has been, is now, or ever can be, is a business that Congress by its supine neglect has deliberately thrown into the hands of Europeans, and sacrificed American shipowners at the instigation of American shipbuilders.

In face of the prosperity achieved in consequence of the abandonment of a ruinous system by other nations, in face of the lamentable decadence its maintenance has brought upon ourselves, we still persist in packing this Sindbad of prohibition, the worst offspring of protection, upon our back, and then we wonder that we alone make no progress!

Certain political economists are in the habit of raking up records of the past wherewith to justify their theories for the present age. They tell us of England's protective laws in Cromwell's time, and say that as by them she then established her mercantile marine, we should endeavor to regain what we have lost, by a return to the policy of that period, from which by the by, we have varied only in a small degree. Upon the same principle we should abandon steam, which, like the progress made by our competitors, in free trade, is merely another improvement in the train of advancing civilization. When such men talk of the steamship enterprises which have triumphed in spite of their antediluvian ideas, they tell us that England supported the Cunard line by subsidies, and thus put her shipbuilding on a firm basis. The inference is that we should go back to 1840, build some 1200 ton wooden paddle steamers and subsidize them.

That this is no idle supposition is shown by the fact that long after England had abandoned that class of vessels in favor of iron screw steamships, we did build and subsidize the unwieldy tubs, some of which are still in the employment of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. We became the laughing stock of the rest of the world who classed us with the Chinese, and our steamships with Chinese junks. The Japanese just emerged from barbarism exceeded us in enterprise.

They now own one line of fifty-seven steamships, more of them engaged in foreign trade than all the steamships we thus employ upon the ocean! At a late day we did commence the use of iron screw steamships of such description and at such cost as one or two domestic ship-yards chose to supply, and thus we were as far from resisting competition as ever.

Now, if there was no ocean traffic of which we should be deprived, the hardship to our shipowners would be comparatively trifling, although the tax upon ships of inferior workmanship and higher cost would, like all the operations of the tariff, be felt by the community at large. This is evident enough.

The Pacific Mail Steamship Company, for example, in order to pay expenses, to say nothing of profits, are obliged to charge a higher fare to passengers, to exact higher rates of freight from shippers and to demand a larger postal contract from government than they could afford to take, if by being allowed to supply themselves with ships in the cheapest markets of the world and of the best quality that compet-