Wilmington Commerce, 1816: A Document
by Alan D. Watson

The year 1816 found the United States rejoicing in the wake of its proclaimed victory over the England in the War of 1812, often termed a second war to confirm American independence. Accompanying the nationalism engendered by the war was an economic boom manifested in northern manufacturing, southern agriculture, and speculation in western lands. North Carolina and its principal port, Wilmington, joined in the postwar exuberance. Among the aspiring merchants of Wilmington who hoped to participate in the postwar prosperity was John Fanning Burgwin, who in January 1816 penned the document that follows.

Wilmington originated in the 1730s as a village on the east bank of the Cape Fear River just below the confluence of the Northwest and Northeast branches of the river. Incorporated in 1739/40 as Wilmington and drawing upon an extensive interior trade through the branches of the Cape Fear and their tributaries, the port rapidly increased in size and economic importance, easily outstripping its downstream rival Brunswick Town. Although located thirty miles from the mouth of the Cape Fear, Wilmington lay along the only major river in North Carolina that flowed directly into the Atlantic Ocean, and thus became the state's foremost deepwater port.

During the colonial era and years of the early Republic war proved the most feasible means of transportation, particularly for the bulky products that comprised most of North Carolina's exports. The river system in the Cape Fear encouraged a commerce in naval stores, wood products, and foodstuffs for which the port of Wilmington became so famous. Rafts and flatboats mainly brought the goods downriver to Wilmington where they were loaded into sloops, schooners, brigs, and larger vessels for ocean traffic. Destinations included particularly Philadelphia and New York along the Atlantic coast, the West Indies, and various British ports.

Wilmington's commerce revealed a port devoted mainly to the export trade. Ships brought manufactured products from Great Britain and the northern ports and tropical products from the West Indies, but often they entered the harbor in ballast or partial ballast. Despite the wealth of the region, Wilmington and its environs simply could not offer a large market for foreign or domestic manufactures because of the relatively sparse populace of the Lower Cape Fear, much of which was slave.

By 1816 Wilmington had doubled its Revolutionary War population to approximately 2,500 residents and remained one of the largest towns in North Carolina. At the conclusion of the War of 1812 Wilmington emerged undisputedly as North Carolina's premier port. It accounted for virtually all of the state's foreign exports and 80 percent of the value of its domestic exports by sea. Fayetteville, located on the Northwest Cape Fear about 90 miles from Wilmington, contributed greatly to Wilmington's commerce. As a center of trade in the upper Cape Fear Valley, Fayetteville supplied the Wilmington market with a variety of exportable goods and in turn absorbed imports from United States coastal cities via Wilmington.

As North Carolina's busiest port, particularly in overseas commerce, Wilmington housed a number of commission merchants or factors who served as brokers of trade, including John Fanning Burgwin. Born at the Grove near Thornbury, England on March 14, 1783, Burgwin was the oldest child of Cape Fear merchant and planter John Burgwin. The elder Burgwin settled in the Wilmington area in 1753, prospered, and moved to England on the eve of the Revolution. Although the son returned with his father to America in 1784, John Fanning went back to England for an education at private schools and an academy. Upon his return to North Carolina in 1801, he assumed his father's mercantile business.

Burgwin amassed a fortune through an inheritance from his father, the acquisition of property by marriage, and his own business acumen. In addition to his planting interests and a partnership in a wholesale business in dry goods and hardware in Wilmington that operated between 1806 and 1808, Burgwin traveled widely, in the process making numerous mercantile contacts in northern states and in England. After spending time in New York City during the War of 1812, Burgwin returned to Wilmington, though subsequently he resided occasionally in New Bern, Philadelphia, New York, several English cities, and Florence, Italy. Later, when he found that his name was being forged on drafts in Europe, he changed the spelling of his name to "Burgwyn," an alteration retained by his descendants.

By late 1815, following the end of the War of 1812 and the Napoleonic wars in Europe, Burgwin decided to undertake the business of commission merchant in Wilmington. At least eight vessels owned by Burgwin or containing consignments for Burgwin & Co. had docked in Wilmington by January 13, 1816, the first arriving at least as early as December 23, 1815. The schooner Alert brought 1,064 bushels of Liverpool salt, the brig
friends who are induced to favour us with their commands, may feel confident that our endeavours will be solely exerted to benefit their Interest. The father of our J.F.B. was concerned largely in the business of this place, during a residence of Fifty years, and himself has been engaged here in commercial transactions, for upwards of ten. With sufficient Capital, ample Credit and respectable friends & correspondents, we flatter ourselves our facilities, experience and attention will give satisfaction & procure us your recommendation.

For state of the Market, we refer you to annexed prices Current, and for your information add some remarks as to the nature of the trade of the place generally, to which we would observe that prices of all kinds of produce, since the peace has enhanced far beyond expectation & will certainly induce the planter to make every exertion to increase his next years crop, which will be, if favourable next season no doubt vary abundant.

Verry Respectfully
We are your Mo Ost Servts


Refer to Robt. Lennox Esqr.
Messrs. N. Rogers & Son
D. R. Lambert Esqr. New York
Isaac Winslow Esqr. - Boston
Messrs C. & P. Wingman - Baltimore
James Thorburn Esqr. Norfolk

REMARKS.

Wilmington is situated on the East side of Cape Fear River, 30 Miles above the Main Bar, & 20 miles above the new Inlet.’ The Flatts are situated 10 miles below the town & vessels drawing over 12 feet water cannot pass with safety except in very high tides. Over the main bar, vessels drawing 18 feet may [pass] at high water. Over the new Inlet they should not venture with more than 12 feet.

Tobacco. The public warehouses for the inspection of all the Tobacco that comes to this place for export is at Fayetteville about 90 miles from hence and the Tobacco is always purchased from the Inspectors original note which contains the Mark, No., Weight, Ton & nett weight. It is never allowed therefore, nor expected to be re-weighed. The quantity brought to Fayetteville of late years is much less than formerly; and at present does not exceed 5000 Hogheads annually. The quality is inferior to Virginia. The price for two or three years before the War, was upon an average from $3 to $3 1/2 per 100 lbs [. ] [S]ince the peace in Europe it advanced to an unusual price and which we by no means expect can or will be supported, either by the planters or by an adequate foreign demand.

Rice. A supply of this article is generally obtainable, & the quality is not inferior to South Carolina or Georgia. The quantity exported from hence is about 10,000 Casks & half Casks.

Flour of this State was formerly deemed inferior to that of the middle states and more frequently shipped to the Northern states than to Europe. But a recent revival of the laws, as related to the

Jane carried 2,000 bushels of Liverpool salt, and the ship Crown Prince carried mahogany, log wood, sugar, and coarse salt. Burgwin & Co. also sold French brandy preserves, French olives, gunpowder, flaxseed, and London superfine cloth. The goods originated in New York, Philadelphia, Norfolk, Turks Island, and St. Thomas in the West Indies. 4

In January 1816, John F. Burgwin, seeking to expand his factoring business in Wilmington, penned a detailed prospectus to an unidentified correspondent. The document, reproduced below, offers valuable insight into the nature of the port and its commerce, for Burgwin describes the factoring business, the navigation of the Cape Fear River, and Wilmington’s principal exports and imports. This document, which may be found in its original in the New Hanover County Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, exemplifies the superb quality of the library’s North Carolina history holdings, particularly for the Lower Cape Fear.

Wilmington N.C. Jany. 1816

Sir

With reference to the annexed respectable names, we beg leave to tender our services at this place. Our establishment is confined to the Commission line. Those
inspection of Flour has greatly enhanced its quality in the estimation of the European and West India Markets, as the super fine will now bear comparison with the production of any other State. The quantity exported the year proceeding (preceding?) the War was about 30,000 Barrels [. ] Weight 196 lbs each.

Cotton. The culture is increasing considerably, & the quality may be Stiled the best of upland & it is equal to that of Georgia or South Carolina. The price has varied according to circumstances from 12 ... [to] 15 cents for several years. This year it has sold 26 ... [to] 30 cents. The quantity exported from hence did not exceed 10,000 Bales annually[.] The planters are getting generally into the habit of packing in Square Bales, and cleaning it better.

Timber. Very considerable shipments have been made from hence before the restrictive system[ for] account of contractors for the English Government of Pitch and Yellow Pine timber. Any quantity may be had and almost any lengths, sizes &c. that is from 20 ... [to] 50 feet long, and from 12 inches square to 12, 18 or 20 by 24. The inconvenience of keeping this article in ponds /in an occasionally rough river/ renders it advisable and prudent to make contracts sufficient time beforehand in order to have a load at command, as well as to obtain the lengths required. The heart of the Pine only is received, & a sworn inspector rejects all not according to contract. A fair price may be called $4 per ton 40 Square feet which increases in proportion to all lengths above 30 foot, when particularly contracted for.

Flaxseed was formerly, and is again becoming an article of some consequence here. Since the commencement of the restrictive system, the cultivation had greatly diminished but is again rapidly reviving, and we have no doubt the present improved plan of cleaning introduced, will not only enhance the value but increase the demand. Many advantageous Shipment have been made to Ireland. Flaxseed like many other articles which are raised in the back country, centres in Fayetteville and is there repacked from Bags into Casks which contain seven Bushels and sells generally from 8 ... [to] $10 per Cask but there is at present no inspection of Flaxseed.

Naval Stores and Lumber may with propriety be called the Staple commodities of this Port[.] [T]he latter [is] almost exclusively confined to the West India Markets. Any quantity of Boards, Scantling & Planks can be /generally Speaking/ immediately procured and ready for Shipping. The price governs from $12 [to] $14 per 1000 feet; occasionally has been advanced to $16; this Season to $22 but $10 ... [to] $15 is about an Average Peace price. Shingles can also be procured in any quantity from $1 1/2 to $3 per M[.] the best rounded 22 inch Cypress [. from] $2 1/2 ... [to] $4. Red Oak Staves are generally plentiful at $10 ... [to] $15 per M. White Oak Barrel Staves [are] scarce, but to be procured if contracted for. Nearly all the Naval Stores exported from the United States come from this State. White Oak Hogsheads Staves plenty.

Tar. The quantity brought to this town is considerable though not as great as formerly, at present about 80 ... [to] 100,000 barrels 32 Gallons each. The Tar burners consider $2 a living price. It varies according to the demand for immediate Shipping; as when vessels come here for Freight without having previously employed an agent to engage or purchase a cargo they are obliged to make a run upon the Market, which holds naturally take advantage of. A very considerable quantity goes coastwise & even ultimately to an European market which of course burthens it with the additional commission freight & Charges.

Pitch can only be occasionally purchased. No large quantity could be procured on an emergency, to complete an order, though it might be previously contracted for at a Stated price[,] $3 per Barrel may be called the average price[.]

Turpentine was an article of very considerable interest just before the restrictive system; not less than 50,000 lbs were exported annually when the price was above $3 per Barrel consisting of 320 lbs[.] [L]arge quantities might be obtained by contracting at the proper season but our market is very precarious as to this article. Dipping or soft is only Merchantable; hard or Scrapings is half price.

We have thus enumerated the principle articles of Exportation to foreign markets with such information as we deemed necessary and now proceed to make some general remarks, in order that our friends may govern themselves accordingly should they be induced to address vessels to our house to procure freight only or accompanied with Consignments to sell for a return Cargo or with orders to purchase ship and crew or to give instructions to purchase and ship on freight or to purchase on Speculation only or to wait for a chartered Ship, &c.

One months notice may be said to be requisite for a commission merchant in this place to do complete justice to his correspondent in either of the cases surmised[,] [F]or a vessel of any size, say over 200 Tons indeed the earlier he receives advice and instructions the greater opportunities he will have of purchasing low, securing freight or disposing of intended consignments for great detention, disappointment and enhancement in prices will unavoidably occur when voyages are abruptly commenced, or too eagerly prosecuted.

A sufficient consignment of saleable articles, cash, undeniable bills as remittance, positive orders to draw on forwarding Bills of Lading, or authority to draw on Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York or Boston are the only means that will command Tobacco, Rice, Cotton, Flaxseed, Naval Stores; for Bills on England cannot conveniently be sold here at least to any large Amount, to the same advantage as in the large cities.

Our market is the most brisk and best Supplied in the Winter months. Produce comes down in large quantities from the latter end of October to the end of April, slackens and declines in May, and ends in June. These are the most favourable times for shipping. Turpentine comes in June and continues until January or February; August September & to the middle of October, are sickly months.

The West India articles of Sugar, Rum, Molasses and Coffee meet a very ready sale [and] generally will always obtain an immediate return Cargo or seldom sell for less than difference of Freight to New York or Boston[,] [V]ery few articles are brought from the European markets for immediate Sale to supply a return Cargo; not because they would not sell but because custom has introduced an indirect mode of supplying in this part of the state with Dry Goods, Hardware Iron &c. from New York, Boston & Philadelpia.

The resident retailers of Dry Goods in this place import principally from the Northern States upon long Credits and make their remittances in Produce as it suits their convenience.

The Fayetteville merchants supply themselves much in the same way except one or two who Import largely and direct; and Dry
Goods would not sell here to great advantage unless long Credits were allowed say 6 or 9 Months.

Salt & Crates of Crockery generally meet with tolerable Sales. The first Article is of considerable importance and perhaps it is not overstating the quantity to say that the Importations into Wilmington are annually from 80,000 to 100,000 bushels. Liverpool blown and Sack Salt does not answer. The season for sale commences in September and continues during October November & December after which there is little or no demand. [D]uring the war the price was extravagant at one time as high as $6[]. Two years before the War the average price might be Stated at 40 to 50 cents per Bushell being then free of duty. Since the Peace the price was governed from 65 to 70 and as high as 120 cents. It may be safely said of this article, that in the season it is sure to meet with quick sale at market prices.

All articles of home produce or imported merchandize are by Custom Bought and Sold delivered & received, by Short or Exact Weight Measure & number and nothing by the Long hundred or Thousand.

We Shall take the liberty when any very material alteration occurs, of occasionally repeating our advices and shall be happy to hear from you in return, whenever favourable opportunities present themselves.

Sigd. John F. Burgwin & Co

Presented by
Messrs. McRea & Gorrie
Wilmington

FOOTNOTES


5. John Burgwin, father of the John Fanning Burgwin (J.F.B.).

6. Burgwin may refer to the Treaty of Ghent, signed in 1814 and ratified in 1815, that ended the War of 1812 between Great Britain and the United States, but more probably he alludes to the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1814/15.

7. New Inlet was an opening cut by a storm in 1761 from the Atlantic Ocean to the Cape Fear River, about ten miles above the Cape. South-Carolina Gazette (Charles Town), October 17, 1761.

8. The Flats were sandbars in the Cape Fear River at the junction of the river and the mouth of Town Creek.