The Brown Papers

The Record of a Rhode Island Business Family

BY JAMES B. HEDGES

THE Brown Papers in the John Carter Brown Library of Brown University constitute the major portion of the documents accumulated by the various members of the Brown family, of Providence, in the course of their multifarious business activities during the period from 1726 to 1913.[1] They comprise letters, ships' papers, invoices, ledgers, day books, log books, etc., and total approximately 350,000 separate pieces, of which by far the greater part consists of the letters which passed between the Browns and their correspondents scattered throughout those portions of the world where trade and business were transacted. About one-fifth of the collection relates to the period before 1783.

Apart from the numerous specific dark corners of American history on which they throw light, these papers are significant: first, because the Brown family touched so many different facets of American business life; second, because of the family habit of destroying nothing that was important; this resulted in an initial completeness of the collection which no subsequent, self-appointed guardian of the family's reputation has seen fit to impair. The papers, therefore, give the plain, unvarnished version of several important chapters in the history of American business. They are notable in the third place because of their time span. There are, of course, many collections of papers

[1] A collection of Brown Papers, especially of Moses Brown, is in the Library of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

covering one or two generations of a given family or business but it is doubtful if there is another large body of documents in America representing seven generations of one business family, whose dominant business interests shifted from one generation to another. The Browns were a flourishing business concern at the time of the Seven Years' War; their activities were vastly greater and more complex when the American Civil War broke out a hundred years later.

The first of the family, of whose commercial career we have record, was James Brown, a Providence merchant and a shipowner in a modest way as early as 1726, but chiefly important as the father of the four Brown brothers, Nicholas, Joseph, John, and Moses. When he died before his sons had achieved their majorities, his brother Obadiah stood *in loco parentis* to the boys and ultimately took them into the firm of Obadiah Brown & Company. It was this Company which first really put the family on the map and made them formidable competitors with the merchant aristocracy of Newport. Upon the death of Obadiah Brown in 1762, the business was reorganized under the name of Nicholas Brown & Company through which the four brothers carried on until the eve of the Revolution, when the firm was dissolved.

While the papers are not especially revealing for the period prior to 1750, from that date to the outbreak of the War for Independence they are both full and varied. More voluminous than, and quite as diversified as, the combined materials which have come down to us from the Newport merchants of those years, the papers will prove indispensable to the one who will write the history of Rhode Island commerce in the quarter century preceding Independence. They abound in material relating to privateering and trade with the enemy during the Seven Years' War. They illuminate every phase of the trade with the West Indies, both British and foreign. They contain an exceptionally full correspondence with

British mercantile houses, such as Hayley & Hopkins of London and Henry Cruger of Bristol; correspondence richly descriptive of the conditions governing commercial relations with the Mother country in that period.

For the pre-Revolutionary Era, however, the papers are most notable for the hundreds, even thousands, of letters to and from merchants in all of the important commercial centers within the colonies. One of the important chapters of colonial history which remains to be written is that of the intercolonial or coastwise trade of the continental colonies. For the investigation of this trade on the eve of the Revolution the letters just referred to will be of prime importance. Typical of this material is the long-sustained and voluminous correspondence of the Browns with the great whaling families of Nantucket, the Starbucks, the Folgers, the Husseys, and the Rotches. The letters from these families not only make clear every detail of the trade between Nantucket and the mainland in the products of the whale fishery, but they are replete with significant reports regarding the condition and extent of whaling in the period just prior to the Revolution which seem not to have found their way into the histories of Nantucket whaling. Indeed, a comparison of the letters with the histories warrants the belief that more Nantucket manuscripts relating to whaling may have survived in the Brown papers than on the island itself.

For the United Association of Spermaceti Candle Manufacturers, whose importance as the forerunner of modern American big business certain recent writers have somewhat exaggerated, the Brown papers contain not only every one of the annual agreements of the Association, but, what is more significant, the large correspondence carried on among the members of the Association, showing the incessant bickering, the mutual suspicion and the constant fear

that the other fellow would secretly violate the letter of the agreement.

The student interested in the Jewish mercantile community in the colonies before 1776 will find the Brown manuscripts rich in letters which passed between the Browns and Jewish merchants in the various ports.

Preoccupation in business did not, of course, prevent the successful merchant from taking note in his correspondence of developments outside of the field of trade. First and last there is in the collection a substantial body of letters relating to pre-Revolutionary politics in Rhode Island and other colonies, to the conduct of elections, including the corrupting of the electorate, and to the movement of protest against British policy after 1763. When there is written for Rhode Island in the years prior to 1775 the counterpart of the volumes of Becker and Lincoln for New York and Pennsylvania respectively, the author will find the Brown papers an important source.

The dissolution of the firm of Nicholas Brown & Company shortly before the break with Britain changed the form but not the substance of the Brown Brothers' business activity. Through the years of the War for Independence there existed an informal association among them in their many-sided ventures, while certain ones of them, notably Nicholas and John, were frequently engaged in commercial risks with other merchants of Providence, Nantucket, and Boston.

For the years of the War the papers are very complete. Early in the conflict the Browns entered into a contract with the Secret Committee of Congress, not only for the construction of several ships but also for the importation of warlike stores and equipment of all kinds from France. Through agreement with this Committee, also, they were engaged actively in the distribution of powder, guns, ship building materials, cloth for uniforms, etc., throughout the northern

states. At the request of the Committee, too, they undertook on an extensive scale the casting of cannon at their furnace in Scituate, Rhode Island, and in this connection they dispatched Elkanah Watson to Newport to buy three tons of good English hay to be used in the casting process. Letters and papers illustrative of these activities appear to have been kept with the greatest fidelity, and provide the materials for a study of the manner in which the infant nation armed and equipped its army and navy.

Of particular interest is a voluminous correspondence pertaining to trade with France, both before and after the Treaty of Alliance. In January, 1776, the Browns established contact with mercantile firms in Nantes and Bordeaux, through which they were to obtain the military supplies to be imported into the country under their contract with the Committee of Congress. This proved to be the beginning of a commercial connection which was to continue throughout the War. The many letters which passed between the Browns and these French houses, together with the complete record of every ship which the Browns sent to France, have been preserved. The ships' papers indicate the goods sent to France and the cargoes which returned. The letters show the widespread belief, in this country and in France, that this was but the beginning of a flourishing commerce between the two countries, in which, with the return of peace, France would take the place previously occupied by Britain as the great beneficiary of the American trade. The letters show, too, the difficulties under which the trade with France was carried on. The Browns soon discovered that the French market differed drastically from the British. Commodities long acceptable in Britain would not answer in France. Every letter from France complained of the cargoes received and specified the goods to be sent. It was only when the Browns had established a factor in Virginia

for the purchase of tobacco, and one in South Carolina for the buying of rice and indigo, that they were able to satisfy the needs of the French market. The letters further reveal the disappointment experienced by American merchants when they realized that the mercantile houses in France and Holland were not disposed to grant the extended credit to which they had been accustomed in Britain. A reading of these letters leaves no doubt in one's mind as to why, despite all high resolves to the contrary, the Americans abandoned the French trade in favor of the British as soon as peace came.

In 1778 the Browns sent Elkanah Watson, the later organizer of the Berkshire Agricultural Societies, and an enthusiastic proponent of the Erie Canal, to Nantes, where, in partnership with Jonathan Williams, he engaged in business as their correspondent for the ensuing four years. The copious Watson correspondence supplements that with the French merchants and rounds out the picture of trade with our ally for the War years. Finding that the opportunities in Nantes were not all that he had hoped for, Watson abandoned France for London in 1782, without waiting for the signing of the definitive treaty of peace. This action was tacit recognition of the fact that, although we were about to achieve our political independence, we were to remain an economic colony of Britain for another quarter century.

When the British blockade of Newport made it impossible for the Browns to do business in Providence, they carried on through Nantucket and later through Boston. Throughout the War they were closely associated in various ventures with Christopher Starbuck of Nantucket. They jointly sent ships to France, to St. Eustatius and to Surinam. At one time Nicholas Brown and Starbuck had eight ships at Surinam, through which a prosperous trade with Holland was carried on. J. Franklin Jameson once wrote a significant

article on the trade with St. Eustatius during the War, based largely on the correspondence of the British ambassador at The Hague.[2] Interesting papers could now be written on both the St. Eustatius and the Surinam trades from the merchants' point of view. For such studies the Brown papers are rich in documentary evidence. A large body of letters which passed between the Browns and Amsterdam houses doing business in these Dutch colonial ports serves to complete the story of this hazardous trade.

The large correspondence of the Browns, carried on throughout the War with merchants along the Coast from Savannah to Portland, contains much with respect to the economic and military situation the country over. From 1778 on, their furnace at Scituate did a land office business in the casting of cannon for privateers being fitted out in the various ports from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Philadelphia. Especially notable were the large orders for guns coming from Salem and New London.

The papers are not without evidence of trade with the enemy. Goods were exchanged with the English in the West Indies at various points and in devious ways. And commerce with Britain flowed through other channels as well. One Boston merchant wrote with great enthusiasm to Nicholas Brown about the lucrative trade which was being carried on between Boston and North Faro, a Danish Island situated between Iceland and the Orkneys, from which there was a large clandestine business with various ports in Britain. Another prominent Boston merchant became involved in the toils of the law in Rhode Island because he was charged with conducting a prosperous illicit trade with the enemy. The Browns appear to have transacted business with Hayley

[2] "St. Eustatius in the American Revolution," *American Historical Review*, vol. 8, pp. 683–708.

and Hopkins, the great London house, in greater or less degree throughout the War.

Many are the interesting sidelights of the War revealed in the papers, such as the attempt of the Browns, at the beginning of the conflict, to obtain a corner on the flour market in southern New England by buying up flour in Philadelphia; or the situation revealed in the letters of the Starbucks, Folgers, and Rotches of Nantucket to Nicholas Brown, telling him that the scandalous conduct of the crew of one of his privateers at Nantucket was giving the Baptist commonwealth of Rhode Island an evil reputation in Massachusetts eyes. On another occasion, Nicholas Brown, with the aid of Christopher Starbuck, endeavored to turn to his private advantage the sanction of the Continental Congress for the imporation of salt from the Bahamas, a sanction founded upon the imperious national need for that commodity. When Brown and Starbuck asked an exorbitant price for the cargo of salt which one of their ships had brought to Stonington, Connecticut, the local authorities stepped in and forced its sale at a just price.

Few are the aspects of business and commercial life during the Revolution to which the Brown papers cannot make their contribution. The recent book of Robert East, *Business Enterprise During the American Revolutionary Era*,[3] would have benefited greatly from the use of this collection. It should be remarked, however, that Mr. East is not to be criticized for not using the papers. He knew of their existence but, of course, was unable to consult them.

The effects of the Revolution upon the mercantile classes is a moot question. Richard Hildreth declared that "one large portion of the wealthy men of colonial times had been expatriated, and another part had been impoverished by the

[3] (New York, 1938).

Revolution."[4] "In their place," he said, "a new moneyed class had sprung up, especially in the eastern states, men who had grown rich in the course of the war as sutlers, by privateering, by speculations in the fluctuating paper money, and by other operations not always of the most honorable kind." From this point of view East, in the book just referred to, is inclined to dissent. He believes a substantial portion of the merchant class weathered the storm and carried on after the War. By virtue of the copious correspondence of the Browns with the many merchants of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, before and after the War, their papers throw some light on this point. A comparison of the names of their correspondents in the three cities before 1775 and after 1783 tends to support the view of Hildreth rather than that of East. The familiar names of the pre-Revolutionary period are conspicuous by their absence in the 1780's. And we know with certainty that vitually none of the Newport merchants remained.

Among the merchants who did survive the upheaval, however, were the Browns themselves. At the close of the War, Joseph Brown turned to the contemplative life, while the other brothers went their separate ways in business. Moses Brown, while continuing as a merchant, directed his attention more and more to manufacture. John Brown sent the first Rhode Island ship to China in 1787, speculated actively in the depreciated paper of the day, and scandalized the Quaker conscience of his brother Moses by conducting a vigorous propaganda against the prospective Congressional prohibition upon the African slave trade which finally came in 1808. In association with George Benson, originally of Boston, Nicholas Brown organized the firm of Brown and Benson. With the inclusion of Thomas Poynton Ives in

[4] Richard Hildreth, *The History of the United States of America* (New York, 1849–1852), vol. 3, p. 465–66.

1792, the Company became Brown, Benson, and Ives. When George Benson retired in 1796, there began the partnership of Brown and Ives, under which name several generations of Browns, Ives' and Goddards were to carry on into the twentieth century.

The activities of Brown and Ives in the period immediately following the close of the Revolution are typical of the process of readjustment forced upon the commercial community by the dislocations occasioned by the outcome of the conflict. Substitute trades had to be developed to take the place of those now closed to Americans, especially that with the West Indies. Soon the ships of the Browns were familiar sights in the harbors of the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, and, somewhat later, in the Mediterranean. Nicholas Brown not only promptly followed his brother John into the China trade, but he dispatched a ship to Brazil in 1785, which must take rank as one of the earliest calls to that area. His ship, the *Ann and Hope*, is believed to have been the first American ship to visit Australia, where she called in 1798. The papers are rich in records of the Baltic, China, and East India trade and they illustrate fully the hazards as well as the profits of successful maritime ventures by neutrals during the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. No history of the China and East India trade of Rhode Island can be written without recourse to this collection.

Of unusual interest is a bundle of over two hundred letters received by Brown & Ives during the latter part of the year 1815 from mercantile establishments in commercial centers the world over. Every important British and continental port is represented, as are those of China, the East Indies, and India. Taken collectively these letters present a picture of world economic conditions at the close of one era and the beginning of another which it would probably be difficult to duplicate. The letters are very full in their description of the

state of the market, commercial needs and opportunities, and hopes and expectations for the future. Because of their unity of theme and their significance, this group of letters should be published in full. And, incidentally, they offer convincing proof of the world-wide acquaintance enjoyed by Brown and Ives in the commercial circles of the day.

A dominant note in our economic history after 1815 is the gradual transfer of capital accumulated in maritime trade to manufacture and works of internal improvement, a change which foreshadowed the gradual decline of our merchant marine and the ultimate triumph of manufacture in New England. In Rhode Island the victory of the factory came earlier than in Massachusetts and was complete by 1830. In 1838 Brown & Ives sold their last ship, bringing to a close a century of adventure at sea.

Since 1790, when Moses Brown opened the first cotton factory in America at Pawtucket, the Brown family had been interested in manufacture, and after 1815 Brown & Ives rapidly emerged as one of the two important groups dominating the cotton manufacture in southern Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and eastern Connecticut. Soon they controlled hundreds of thousands of spindles in the area and were to the industry in their sector what the Lowells and the Lawrences were in Massachusetts. The writer has identified no less than a dozen large cotton manufacturing establishments owned by Brown & Ives in the middle of the nineteenth century, while they were obviously aiding in the financing of many others. The Lonsdale Mills, the Blackstone Manufacturing and the Hope Company were but a few of the important plants with which they were then identified.

It is fortunate indeed that the family carefully preserved the records of their cotton manufacture. While Caroline Ware, in her history of the beginnings of the New England

cotton manufacture,[5] accords to Moses Brown his rightful place as the founder of the Industrial Revolution in America, her book contains no mention of Brown & Ives. Indeed her treatment of the southern New England phase of the industry is rather inadequate, for reasons which reflect no discredit upon her. When she wrote, the two great essential collections, the Sprague papers and the Brown & Ives papers were unavailable to her. The Sprague manuscripts, taken over by the courts when the firm went into bankruptcy in 1873, were still in the custody of the courts when Miss Ware prepared her work in the 1920's, and have since been destroyed by judicial decree. The destruction of the Sprague records, therefore, renders the Brown papers doubly important for the history of the southern New England cotton manufacture. Ultimately the history of the industry for the pre-Civil War period will have to be rewritten in the light of this collection of materials.

Because they were so largely concerned in the manufacture of cotton, Brown & Ives were also much interested in the trade in raw cotton. Their papers are filled with a long-sustained correspondence with Baring Brothers, with cotton dealers in Le Havre, with traders in New Orleans, Mobile, Memphis, Augusta, and Savannah, and with Thomas Rathbone Sons & Co. of Liverpool, this last extending from 1820 through the Civil War. The one writing the history of the American cotton trade will find these letters a rich source of information.

What has been said about the cotton manufacture indicates the importance of the Brown papers to the one who will one day undertake the writing of the history of the transfer of capital from the sea to the land, which the rise of manufacture involved. Contemporaneously with the

[5] Caroline Ware, *The Early New England Cotton Manufacture; a Study in Industrial Beginnings* (Boston and New York, 1931).

investment in manufacture of the fluid wealth they had accumulated in sea-borne trade, Brown & Ives diverted a portion of these funds to the building of canals. Starting with the Blackstone Canal, they were involved in the financing of canals as far west as the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Full records of this phase of their activity provide further material for a chapter in the development of inland transportation in America.

By the 1840's the New England cotton manufacture, which had originally been a capital-consuming industry, had become a capital-producing one. The mills had proven profitable beyond the wildest dreams of their founders. As the profits mounted, enterprising men began to turn their thoughts to the investment of their surplus capital in the interior of the country. The railway, just then coming into its own, offered an inviting field for exploitation. For the student of the financing of American railways before the Civil War, the Brown papers will prove richly rewarding. Brown & Ives were active participants in the financing of virtually all the lines west of the Hudson, while they were the actual promoters of several of the early lines in the Mississippi Valley. Although they never obtained control of one of the great systems and are, therefore, not associated with railroading in the public mind, their papers are probably richer in material for that reason. They roamed so freely over the whole field and carried on such a wide correspondence with bankers, brokers, and promoters, all of which has been preserved, that their records are an essential source for a study of the financing of American industry in the middle period.

Once attracted to the West by way of the railway, the attention of Brown & Ives was next directed to mining, where they were largely concerned in the opening up of the Marquette range, the first of the Lake Superior iron ore

fields to be exploited. Their papers are particularly full on this chapter of their history.

A favorite form of investment for men of capital throughout most of our history has been speculation in wild lands. First and last a good deal has been written upon this subject but comparatively little of it has been from the angle of the speculators themselves, or based upon their records.

Among the large dealers in wild lands were the Browns. The original Nicholas Brown was one of the stockholders of the Ohio Company of 1788, which established the Marietta settlement, and as late as the 1840's the family still owned some ten thousand acres of these lands. At various times the family dealt extensively in lands in Maine, Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska, their holdings in the Mississippi Valley states alone running into hundreds of thousands of acres. A map of their Illinois properties in the fifties shows that they owned a large part of several counties; and the same was true in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska a decade later. These Middle Western lands were purchased with the profits of the cotton manufacture, again illustrating the important sequence in the development of New England capital—from commerce to cotton manufacture, to western lands, railroads, and mines. Prior to the Civil War they acquired much of their land through the purchase of depreciated soldiers' bounty warrants from veterans who were not in a position to locate the warrants themselves. On one occasion in the fifties John Carter Brown purchased, at 84 to 89 cents per acre, warrants covering 40,000 acres. This particular member of the family was a stockholder in the New England Emigrant Aid Company, then engaged in trying to colonize Kansas with settlers from the free states. He located these warrants on land tributary to the Emigrant Aid Company's towns in Kansas, a fact which supports the

view of Albert J. Beveridge, in the second volume of his *Lincoln*,[6] that the Emigrant Aid Company was not entirely an idealistic society bent upon blocking the expansion of the slave power. It was a venture in land speculation as well.

It was the belief of the proponents of the homestead policy adopted in 1862, that large-scale speculation in the public domain would be impossible once the lands were made free to the actual settler. Recently we have had it made clear to us that the hopes of these men were not realized, and that after 1862 the public lands in the West continued to be a paradise for the speculator. Among those who thus acquired for speculative purposes large areas by cash purchase from the government were the Browns, the Ives' and the Goddards of Providence.

Probably no other group of land speculators in our history dealt in wild lands on so many different frontiers or over so long a period as did the Browns. And no detail of their story need go untold. From the abundant records preserved in the Brown papers it will be possible to prepare a work on land speculation more complete than any of which the writer is aware. Such a type study would illuminate the whole subject of the economics of land settlement in the mid-nineteenth century.

It has become axiomatic that every war creates its own crop of millionaires, and is attended by widespread speculation, even profiteering. In any conventional treatment of the Civil War we may read that speculation, large profits, and fat contracts with the government for supplies helped to lay the foundations, not only of the great industrial development which the North experienced in the generation following the War, but also of some of the great fortunes of that era. But, curiously enough, documents illustrative of

[6] *Abraham Lincoln, 1809–1858* (Boston and New York, 1928), vol. 2, pp. 299–300, 307.

commodity speculation in the Civil War, or any other war, seem not to have survived; or, if they have survived, they appear not to have seen the light of day. The writer had never seen such documents until he found them in the Brown papers. Here, again, this collection seems to offer the opportunity for a complete type study of a social and economic process which has gone on in every one of our wars, but about which little of a specific character has been written.