



Fleet of Fortune: Stephen Girard's Shipping Empire.

– by Jon Newton –
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Before Stephen Girard was a banker of unequalled success, before he was Philadelphia's and Pennsylvania's real estate king, before he built a coal and timber empire, he was a ship owner and world trader. And that is what made him a tycoon.

In 1773, after six voyages under French colors as a second mate, first mate, or supercargo, Girard was granted authority to act as captain of a merchant vessel. The next year he left his Bordeaux home for good. As first mate of the *Julie*, a position that permitted him to carry his own goods for trade, he sailed for Port-au-Prince with a badly miscalculated cargo of handkerchiefs, hats, parasols, whips, and pistols. These items were popular in Europe but had already flooded the West Indies markets, so his inaugural attempt

at trading on his own resulted in a bitter loss. But Girard sucked it up, got relieved from the *Julie* and discharged from the French merchant service, bought sugar and coffee, and headed for New York where these goods were selling at a premium. His fortune was waiting to be made.

In the next four years Girard made several trips between New York, Sainte Domingo, and New Orleans sailing for Thomas Randall, a successful trader whose example Girard sedulously modeled. In May 1776, as master and part owner of the sloop *Jeune Bebe*, Girard ran into foul weather and foul play at the hands of a British frigate captain and the

rest is history. Unable to make for New York he limped into Philadelphia. Stephen Girard decided it was as good a place as any to set up business. His fortune would be made here.

Biographers and historians disagree on Girard's first vessel but we'll go with the account that says it was the *Water Witch*, built shortly after his return to Philadelphia having fled to Mount Holly to escape the British occupation.



Montesquieu

In 1784, Girard built and launched his first serious ship, the 200-ton *Deux Freres II*, aka the *Two Brothers*, *Kitty*, *Deux Amis*, and *Virginie*. He began as a short-haul trader to the West Indies, avoiding the high risk of trans-Atlantic shipping. He bought used ships and kept his fleet intentionally small, never owning more than six vessels at a time, to minimize risk. He then resold the ships after just

a few successful voyages while their sails and rigging were still in good condition.

Girard's trading business in the West Indies and in Europe flourished despite his ships being constantly exposed to the varying threats of war, privateering, pirates, embargos, weather-related risks, and the occasional dishonest captain. In 1787, he began his first venture trading with China. In 1809, he began sending ships around South America en route to China because of the international unrest and the risk of interception at sea. By 1821, Girard had six ships at sea simultaneously — *North America*, *Voltaire*, *Rousseau*,

Helvetius, Surperb, and Montesquieu — all trading in the Far East.

Girard had declined to be an investor in the first American trade voyage to China, from which people like famed Philadelphian Robert Morris made a handsome profit. Instead he watched, and waited, and learned from that voyage and, according to George Wilson in *Stephen Girard, the Life and Times of America's First Tycoon*, “eventually derived more profits from the China trade than any of those who were in on the ground floor.” His investment was heavy but the payoff was huge. He built several ships specifically for the China trade: the *Voltaire* followed by the *Rousseau*, both 300 tons. *Helvetius*, 330 tons, and the *Montesquieu*, 372 tons. Famed sculptor William Rush carved the figureheads for all four.

The “philosophers” ploughed the seas to China either around South America and across the Pacific or around Africa and across the Indian Ocean. The goods were many and varied but always there were lucrative staples such as tea, porcelain, spices, and coffee. How lucrative? In 1804, Girard sold a single cargo of tea in Philadelphia for \$128,869. One third of all trading between the United States and China in the early 1800s was done through Philadelphia, and Stephen Girard was at the forefront of it all. Four of his ships made 15 voyages to Canton.

And what else was in those ships? A profitable, if dishonorable, cargo.

No, it was not slaves. Girard owned slaves in Louisiana but he was never a trader. However he was, to use today's term, a major drug dealer. The drug was opium and it was originally just a means to an end. The end was tea. According to Chris Carson in an article entitled *The Opium Wars: thirst and addiction*, opium for tea was simply a way of doing business and Girard was a businessman. I tried to verify this using the better-known biographies of Girard with mixed results. I was not surprised at the absence of any mention of opium in McMasters' *The Life and Times of Stephen Girard*. I am surprised, however, that there is no reference to it in Wilson's book, which was written much later. But I did find it in Wildes's *Lonely Midas*. And it's pretty damning.

Carson's account of Girard's involvement in opium

suggests it was just one of the ways of trading for tea. He has Girard dabbling in the Chinese opium trade in his early career but getting out of it when the going got rough: “Once Chinese military resistance began to increase, (Girard's) interests quickly diminished and he was out of the game before the War officially began. During this time, though, he did accrue a solid profit — a strong foundation for which to build his fortune.”

Wildes describes a significantly less tepid involvement in *Lonely Midas*: “On almost every ship that sailed under the Girard blue pennon for the East, 133 pound cases of opium could be discovered in the cargo, though never on the manifest.” Wildes goes on to describe how Girard, in 1806, instructed one of his captains to buy 20,000 pounds of high-grade opium and smuggle it in through Macao or Canton, advising him it would be a “small trifle” to bribe the port inspectors. “It will be mortifying to me,” Stephen is reported to have said, “if after the *Rousseau* has been at or near a port or a place where opium can be obtained on reasonable terms, she should go to China without reaping the same advantage as others will do.” The others, if you care to excuse Girard's actions on such a basis, might have included the likes of John Hancock, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams, according to Frank Gerace in *Stephen Girard, His Life and Legacy*. Gerace quotes David Wells as claiming: “Ninetenths of (American) merchants were smugglers. One-quarter of all the signers of the Declaration of Independence were bred to commerce, to the command of ships, and to contraband trade.”

There can be no doubt that Girard was in the opium trade for the big haul if not the long one. Associate Director for Historical Resources at Girard College, Elizabeth Laurent, in response to my query about references to opium in Girard's papers, sent three pages listing 81 citations from 1815 to 1821 — hardly dabbling and hardly in Girard's early career, as Carson claimed.

One man's fortune is another man's misfortune. Or in this case several million men's misfortune. By the mid 1800s one in every three adults in China was addicted to opium. It bankrupted the once proud and prosperous nation for two decades. Girard was a contributor to this although he was reportedly clear of actively smuggling the drug by the time the Opium Wars broke out. But ill-gotten gains



Good Friends

know no bounds. Girard's bank became the Philadelphia representative for England's Baring Bank, and thus the U.S. account holder for the British East India Company, the largest and most insidious of all the opium traders.

A lady's man in ship name only.

Harry Emerson Wildes's excellent biography of Stephen Girard is called *Lonely Midas* for a variety of reasons, one being the obvious. As Wildes puts it: "...(Girard) had known few girls other than those a roving sailor casually meets." But you'd never know it from the vessels he sailed on.

The names of ships with which Girard was associated — either as pilotin, mate, supercargo, captain, or owner — ran an odd gamut. Several gamuts, in fact. From *Modest* to *Superb*, for example. And from philosophers *Voltaire* to *Montesquieu*. But it was the women who proliferated. It is common still today to name ships for the distaff side but it is surprising how many ships so christened were involved in Girard's sea faring and shipping career. Here is the veritable harem Girard commanded in one fashion or another: *Julie*, *Amiable Louise*, *Jeune Bebe*, *Catherine*, *Mary*, *Betsy*, *Diana*, *Flora*, *Charming Kitty*, *Sally (I and II)*, *Polly*, *Fanny*, *Minerva*, and *La Virginie (Virginia)*. Of them all only two had any basis in romantic fact. One was the *Mary*, of course, named for his unfortunate wife in an ill-fated marriage. The other, which scarcely pre-dated that marriage, was the *Jeune Bebe*, a new sloop christened in New York by a smitten Stephen in honor of the charming *Bebe Duplessis*. Ah, but that's another story for another time.

With Good Friends like this who needs enemies?

The *Good Friends* is often described as Girard's favorite if not finest ship but it is a suspicious claim. True, her relationship with Girard lasted 20 years but she sailed troubled seas and seemed to have her own peculiar propensity for misfortune. The saga begins with her clouded origin. One account has the *Good Friends* built for Girard by Morris Goff in Kensington and launched in April 1793. Another account says the ship was formerly *Le Bon Ami* built in Bordeaux in 1792. The first account has Jean Girard on board for the maiden voyage as supercargo for his brother and says the ship encountered stormy weather at the outset, that it listed severely, that the captain was below stricken with fever, that the several French passengers panicked, that heavy seas washed over the weather deck and damaged cargo, and that they were twice chased by privateers. Yet, the account continues, "the ship arrived without serious mishap." Gives a whole new meaning to bon voyage! The second account makes no mention of Jean Girard but does say that the mate and five crewmen were swept overboard in a storm near Norfolk.

The *Good Friends* had a successful trip in 1794, sailing Philadelphia-Norfolk-Bordeaux with a cargo of wheat and tobacco and returning with a cargo of brandy. But in 1795, the ship was caught in a hurricane off Hampton Roads and three crewmen were drowned. Then, because she had put in for repairs and replacement crew at Norfolk, where yellow fever had broken out, the *Good Friends* was kept double time in quarantine at Hamburg. In 1802, on a voyage to that same port, her captain died at sea.

In 1808, the *Good Friends* could be found embargoed and lying in the Delaware River for nearly a year. In May of that year, she was captured by Danish privateers and had her cargo of wood and cotton sequestered and eventually ransomed for \$37,000. In 1809, she was captured by the British off the coast of Norway but was eventually escorted by the British, who were at war with France, to Amelia Island with a "cargo of great value." She arrived at Amelia Island just in time for an uprising against Spain by the inhabitants. She eventually set sail for Philadelphia but was seized by U.S. Customs under the non-importation law and her cargo eventually auctioned off. The *Good Friends* was again captured by the British in 1813 off the coast of

France, taken to England, and sold — probably with a hearty “good riddance” or the French equivalent from owner Stephen Girard.

Fate of the floating philosophers and others.

In fact, the *Good Friends* probably didn't have a much worse time of it than most of Stephen Girard's ships. At least she saw 20-years of service, although a lot of that time was in captivity. But have a look at the record of some of the others: *Helvetius* — captured by Danish privateers and released. *Liberty* — captured by British at Halifax; subsequently wrecked in Eider River; subsequently repaired and returned to service. *Modest* — caught in ice floe at Fort Mifflin; wrecked off Florida Keys en route to Havana. *Montesquieu* — captured by British in Delaware Bay with a cargo valued at \$164, 944.20 (It's rumored that it was the 20 cents that really pissed the owner off and led to his underwriting the War of 1812.); wrecked off Goeree, Netherlands. *Sally II* — seized by a British man-of-war and detained three months. *Superb* — wrecked near Nassau, Bahamas. *Polly* — captured by privateers; captured by the British; condemned. *Voltaire* — run aground at the mouth of the Elbe; repaired but paid double bond under embargo act; captured by British

and released two months later; had undisclosed accident off coast of New Jersey; wrecked en route to Amsterdam; run aground in Texel. *Mary* — wrecked near Sinepuxent Inlet, MD. *Deux Freres* — crew arrested in Charleston on suspicion of murdering French captain. *Nancy* — wrecked off Turks Island. *Polly* — condemned by British prize court in Bermuda.

All things considered however, which in those days meant possible seizure or sinking by British or French warships; raiding and ransoming by British, French, or Danish privateers; plundering by pirates; impressing of crews by the British admiralty; and embargoing and confiscation by the government of the United States of America, a country of which he was a citizen, Stephen Girard still managed to mount and operate one of the most profitable merchant fleets in history. It was the basis of his wealth from which all other accomplishments derived, including his legendary philanthropy.

About the Author: From 1998 to 2010, Jon Newton was editor of *Steel & Garnet*, the venerable periodical of the Girard College Alumni Association (GCAA) continuously published for over a century. During his tenure he transformed it from a newsletter into a colorful feature-story format magazine with topical take-a-stand editorials, contributed columns, and a lively letters-to-the-editor department.



Newton is also co-founder and the committee chair of Founder's Keepers, an initiative for the restoration and preservation of Founder's Hall at Girard College, a National Historic Landmark. Additionally, he chairs the Stephen Girard Awareness Committee and wrote and directed this website, ForgottenPatriot.com. He won the GCAA Award of Merit in 2001, and the Stephen Girard Medal, the alumni association's highest award, in 2012.

Newton's writing career began while a student at Girard College as a columnist for *Girard News* and an editor for the *Corinthian* yearbook. After graduation he served as a journalist in the U.S. Navy on assignment in Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year. He then began a long career in marketing communications, subsequently founding his own advertising agency where he served as CEO and creative director, winning numerous national and regional awards for creative excellence in television, radio, and print ad campaigns.

Newton is currently a board member and the historian/journalist for the Navy Icebreaker USS Edisto Association. He is married to KT, a criminal prosecutor with the U.S. Department of Justice. They live in Bryn Mawr, PA.