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Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



Pepper and Providence

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The official seal of the City of Salem depicts a figure in oriental costume and bears, in Latin, the motto: “To the farthest port of the rich East.” The figure represents an Achinese man, a resident of the Sultanate of Aceh (Aceh), on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The motto is a reminder of the great productivity of the region in the growing of pepper, a precious crop that dominated maritime trade for centuries.

America Enters the East Indies Trade

During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, first the Portuguese and then the Dutch monopolized the East Indian pepper trade. In the later years of the eighteenth century, the iron grip held by European East India companies began to loosen and independent traders found ways to circumvent traditional restrictions. By the 1780s, conditions were right for exploitation of East Indian markets by outsiders.

Salem’s fame as a major world trading port began in earnest following the close of the American Revolution. Beginning in the 1660s, the British Acts of Trade, commonly called the Navigation Acts, were instituted to regulate colonial commerce. Non-compliance with the resented laws set the stage for rebellion that finally boiled over in Massachusetts at Lexington and Concord in 1775. The Revolution marked the end of grudging American adherence to the commercial restrictions that England had placed on her colonies.

Soon after the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolution in 1783, American entrepreneurs, such as Elias Hasket Derby of Salem, identified potential markets and sent out ships in search of new trading partners around the world. Successful voyages to China and ports in the Indian Ocean created a new market for Far Eastern products at home.

William Vans, Jr. and the Pepper Trade

Aboard Mr. Derby’s ex-privateer ship *Grand Turk* when she departed for the Cape of Good Hope and Isle de France (Mauritius) on December 3, 1785, was her newly appointed supercargo (owner’s business agent), William Vans, Jr., of Salem and Boston.¹ Exactly how much profit was made on the voyage is not certain, but, as Vans said in his memoirs; “I made a great voyage, bringing home to Salem, three capitals for the one I carried out.”²

Vans was undoubtedly attuned to the business practices of the Dutch East India Company and its wavering sphere of influence in the Far East. The Dutch had been assembling pepper cargoes at Batavia (Jakarta) from various localities across what is now Indonesia for nearly two hundred years. It was evident that there was a market for pepper and possibly a supply to be exploited under the right circumstances. As it turned out, shortly after his return to Salem in 1787, Vans became a partner in Freeman & Vans of Boston. In April 1788 the newly established firm fitted out their brig *Cadet*, Jonathan Carnes, Master, for a voyage

that eventually brought her to the west coast of Sumatra.³ The *Cadet* was “the first American vessel at Bencoolin, Tappannooly, Moco Moco, Padang, and many other ports on that coast, where I bought and traded for Cassia, Cinnamon, Gold Dust, Pepper, Camphor, Gum Benjamin, and other goods, and opened a trade with that island, that has been so beneficial to the United States, and particularly to the town of Salem.”⁴

Changing his orientation from the Sumatra trade, Vans spent the years between 1789 and 1793 as the company’s representative in London, trading in piece goods and merchandise. Following a quick visit to Boston in the winter of 1793, he accompanied a cargo of coffee, cotton, oil and sugar to Hamburg. There he assembled another cargo which he sold to the French government for \$120,000 while clearing a net profit of \$60,000.⁵ In 1794, William Vans was appointed Consul in France by President Washington. Unfortunately for Vans, while he was living in France, his business suffered a series of setbacks, including the loss at sea of his partner, Jonathan Freeman, in 1795. He left Paris on January 1, 1799, returning to the United States via Hamburg.

The Golden Age of Pepper Trading

The next American contact with Sumatra appears to have been in 1796. Captain Carnes, who was also the nephew of Salem merchant Jonathan Peele, became Master of the schooner *Rajah* built for Jonathan and Willard Peele and Ebenezer Beckford at Salisbury, Massachusetts, in 1795. *Rajah* cleared for “India” in November 1795 and returned eighteen months later following an eventful voyage to locations that Captain Carnes would not divulge. Loaded in bulk with pepper, the cargo returned a 700 per cent profit.⁶ After she was converted to a brig, *Rajah* made several more highly profitable Sumatra voyages under the command of Captain Carnes, returning each time with tons of pepper.

Other merchants soon got into the game. George Crowninshield & Sons, Joseph Peabody, Abel Lawrence & Co., Nathaniel West, Stephen Phillips, and numerous others helped to elevate Salem to what was considered, for a time, the pepper capital of the world. Trans-shipment of pepper worldwide was one of Salem’s major industries into the 1840s, with direct trade between Sumatra and Salem not ceasing until 1846. As market demands and distribution patterns changed, Salem’s luxury trade was being replaced by manufacturing. Cargoes of coal, hides, and raw materials for industry gradually displaced the huge traffic in spices and tea. Salem owned ships still visited Sumatran ports through 1860, but the heyday of the pepper trade was over. According to local historians Osgood and Batchelder, “The last Salem vessel on the coast was the ship *Australia*, J. Dudley, master, owned by Stone, Silsbee & Pickman.”⁷

And what became of this secret place at “the farthest port of the rich east” commemorated on the official seal of the City of Salem?



Salem Maritime National Historic Site
174 Derby Street
Salem, MA 01970
<http://www.nps.gov/sama>

Locations visited by Salem's pepper trading ships on the west coast of Sumatra were recently devastated by the giant Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004. The most frequently reported location shown on the news was Banda Aceh, at the northern end of the island, once the capital of the Sultanate of Aceh.

History would have been different had the tsunami happened in 1795 instead of 2004. Captain Carnes and the *Rajah* would have arrived at a coast whose potential for trade had been obliterated by the forces of nature, and the population decimated. Jonathan Carnes and his schooner would have provided the only tsunami relief available from the United States, and Salem would have lost its opportunity to reap the wealth of the pepper trade.

Notes

¹ Ship *Grand Turk*, 300 tons, built by Thomas Barstow at Twin Oaks Yard, Hanover, MA, in 1781. William Vans, Jr. (1763-1840) was born in Salem, was placed in a Boston counting house in 1776, returned to Salem in 1781 and was employed with a merchant until 1783, when he entered business as a partner with his father. Upon return from his voyage aboard the *Grand Turk*, he went into partnership with Jonathan Freeman, forming the firm of Freeman & Vans of Boston.

² William Vans, Jr., *A Short History of the Life of William Vans, A Native Citizen of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1825), p.7.

³ Captain Jonathan Carnes (1757-1827) was Vans' brother-in-law, having married Rebecca Vans in 1784.

⁴ Vans, p. 7

⁵ Vans, pp. 8, 9

⁶ Charles S. Osgood and H. M. Batchelder, *Historical Sketch of Salem 1626-1879* (Salem, 1879), p.151

⁷ Osgood and Batchelder, p. 154.

Author: John Frayler, Park Historian, Salem Maritime NHS

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