The William and Favorite: The Post-Revolutionary Voyages of Two Philadelphia Ships

After the Revolution, American merchants worked to replace hazardous wartime ventures with more stable and profitable trades. Parliament allowed United States vessels the same privileges as English vessels when trading in Great Britain, but it prohibited their entry into colonial ports, as did several other nations. Thus, American merchants accustomed to purchasing British goods with profits from West Indian markets before the war now faced new obstacles to their former trades. One Philadelphia mercantile house, Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., used two of their ships acquired in wartime to experiment with promising peacetime opportunities. A brief examination of their experiences offers a good sampling of the ways Americans tried to adapt to the changing commercial patterns and trade restrictions of the post-Revolutionary decade.¹

Stewart, Nesbitt & Co. was organized in 1782 by two Philadelphians of Irish birth. Walter Stewart was a young handsome army colonel who had just married the daughter of the city’s leading investor in privateers, Blair McClenachan. Stewart’s energy and new financial resources helped him convince his close friend, Alexander Nesbitt, to accept him as a business partner. Nesbitt, who had established himself before the war, invested mostly in letters of marque bound for West Indian and French ports, but he was also

¹ The papers of Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., hitherto unexamined, are located in the library of the Mariner’s Museum in Newport News, Virginia. Consisting of more than 600 letters, plus thousands of receipts and accounts, the correspondence is limited to letters received by the company and many of the business papers are undated, leaving time gaps in all the financial records.
the sole owner of a sloop and a schooner, held shares in larger vessels, and was building a brig and a ship.2

Both Stewart and Nesbitt had relatives engaged in trade. Nesbitt was trained by his older brother, John Maxwell Nesbitt, distinguished Philadelphia merchant and frequent associate of Robert Morris. A third Nesbitt brother, Jonathan, resided in L'Orient as the Philadelphia agent for the French tobacco trade. Except for his father-in-law and a cousin who served in the First Continental Congress, Walter Stewart's relatives were not as illustrious in business as the Nesbitts. Brother Adam's linen firm in Dublin was always on the verge of bankruptcy, while brothers Robert and Hall pursued a variety of unsuccessful ventures on both sides of the Atlantic. The husbands of Walter Stewart's three sisters in Ireland also dabbled in business with consistent failure. The partners' tendency to favor correspondents of Irish birth, especially relatives, indicates that the Quakers were not alone in their desire to limit their trade to members of a particular social or religious group. That the use of relatives as business associates proved a mixed blessing to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co. suggests the value of such connections may be easily exaggerated.3

The ship William was a Nesbitt family venture, still under construction when Stewart joined Nesbitt's firm. John Maxwell and Alexander each owned three-eighths of the vessel; Jonathan in L'Orient had the remaining two-eighths. Despite delays and wartime shortages, shipwright Benjamin Eyre worked quickly to launch the vessel in June, 1782, less than ten weeks after signing the contract. Designed to evade enemy blockaders and deliver cargo to friendly ports, the 150-ton ship had only two small cannon (six pounders), and ten wooden cannon, to frighten off enemy privateers.


Obviously, she depended on speed rather than armament to insure her safety.  

At first glance, the *William*’s maiden voyage resembles many of Nesbitt’s previous ventures: she sailed for Havana where American flour was to be exchanged for sugar and Spanish dollars. Actually, the owners hoped their swift ship might attract a purchaser in Cuba. In fact, they were so anxious to get her to Havana for sale that they didn’t even wait to collect a full cargo of flour and she was sent off about one-third empty. The voyage made evident what the owners must have already suspected. “She is Very week and marks much water att See,” master Nicholas Vallance wrote to Alexander Nesbitt.\(^4\) The master of Nesbitt’s brig, *Macaronee*, described the *William* as “most Villanously built” and requiring extensive repairs just to make it back to Philadelphia.\(^5\) Even a new coat of paint couldn’t hide the *William*’s flaws from prospective buyers.\(^6\) The cargo was a disappointment as well, for a glutted market lowered the price of flour to $18.50 per barrel, whereas earlier shipments had gotten up to $24.00.\(^8\) In addition, forty barrels of bread, ruined in the leaking ship, simply had to be destroyed. The *William* returned with sugar and rum which sold for £5 less than it cost to purchase and transport back to Philadelphia. The owners managed slightly better with an equal amount of sugar carried aboard as freight for other merchants, since they received 25 per cent (£232) of the sale. Thus, the *William*’s first voyage ended in disappointment but not disaster.

The second voyage started out more hopefully. With a new deck from Benjamin Eyre, the *William* left for Havana early in 1783 and arrived when the price of flour was rising because the flour in government storehouses had rotted. The full cargo sold for $20.00 to $22.00 per barrel; Vallance could have obtained even more money a few weeks later. Laden with almost twice as much sugar and rum as on her first return voyage, all of it on the owner’s account this time, the *William* fell into enemy hands. Apparently, she was

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\(^4\) Ship *William* building accounts, 1782.

\(^5\) Vallance to Nesbitt, Sept. 15, 1782.

\(^6\) Archibald Gamble to Nesbitt, Oct. 5, 1782.

\(^7\) James Seagrove to Nesbitt, Sept. 29, 1782.

\(^8\) Archibald Gamble to Nesbitt, Sept. 8, 1782.
carried to New York where Nesbitt paid lawyers to secure her release. The three brothers ended up dividing the undistinguished sum of £80 as the net profit from both Cuban excursions.\(^9\)

Nesbitt and Stewart could not have blamed Nicholas Vallance for the William's misfortunes, for they soon named him master of a larger ship, the Favorite. The Favorite was one of two 300-ton French ships purchased to carry Maryland and Virginia tobacco to L'Orient where Jonathan Nesbitt would exchange it for French dry goods. Both ships were jointly owned by D. H. Conyngham (John Maxwell Nesbitt's partner), Alexander Nesbitt, and Walter Stewart, but they were managed, like the William, by Nesbitt and Stewart's company. The French tobacco trade seemed so successful that Jonathan Nesbitt admitted, "the Prospect of Peace is another source of uneasiness to me, for Heaven knows it is the thing... I desire least for twelve months to come."\(^10\) His doubts were justified. Although established wartime trade did not suddenly end with the peace of 1783, Nesbitt and Stewart ignored Jonathan's advice by gradually decreasing tobacco shipments to France in favor of English markets.\(^11\)

In July, 1783, the Favorite, carrying only a partial cargo of tobacco, left Philadelphia for France. With the first mate deserting just before the ship's departure, Vallance and his remaining mate could have enjoyed little rest as they stood alternating watches. Probably there is no connection, but the only crew death aboard a company ship occurred during this passage when a lad fell from the maintopsail yard.\(^12\) The Favorite unloaded tobacco at L'Orient, then continued with its remaining cargo of barrel staves to Ireland. Stewart and Nesbitt had ordered the ship to the Cork merchant house of Vaughan, Hamilton & Co. in the hope that the Irishmen would purchase a share in her, then employ her in the transport of freight and passengers between the two cities. Vaughan and Hamilton, however, had other plans. The ship was too sharp to carry much cargo, they believed, and too low between decks to carry much cargo, they believed, and too low between decks to

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\(^10\) Jonathan Nesbitt to Alexander Nesbitt, Jan. 16, 1783.

\(^11\) Jonathan Nesbitt to Alexander Nesbitt, Nov. 15, 1783; Alexander Nesbitt to Jonathan Nesbitt, Nov. 17, 1783.

\(^12\) Seamen's Agreements, July 24, 1783, with additional notes by Vallance.
carry passengers in comfort. Besides, complete ownership and freighting aboard the vessels of others were safer than joint ownership. Why not order cheap vessels from Philadelphia shipyards and use them for the linen trade in Dublin and London as they did before the war? The two merchant houses could not agree on future ventures.

Vaughan and Hamilton did sell the *Favorite*’s cargo of 80,000 barrel staves, but for £20 less than Stewart and Nesbitt had paid for them, and the Cork merchants could not find freight for the return trip. Finally, they purchased some candles and beef on the Philadelphians’ account and loaded the ship with a dozen passengers and seventy-nine servants. The servants had no shoes, no extra clothing, no bedding or blankets. Berths were constructed so that they would not have to sleep on deck, and Vallance purchased wooden buckets and horn spoons for them as well as pewter spoons and a Japanese teapot for the passengers.

The servants arrived at Port Penn in late December, 1783. One month later, less than a dozen of them had been removed from the ship, each sold one by one, and expenses for their upkeep on the ship in winter began to mount. After six of them tried unsuccessfully to run away, they were all locked up below deck. Anxious to prepare the *Favorite* for a new voyage, Stewart and Nesbitt turned the servants over to a pair of agents, Jones and Tuckniss, at a discount of £3 off the usual price of each adult, and yet were able to make a profit of nearly £400. The agents kept the immigrants aboard ship, where they were easier to control, until the beginning of March when the last one had been sold, doubtless a severe experience for the Irishmen and probably the reason for the severe beating that two seamen from the *Favorite* gave Jones and Tuckniss. The sale price of the servants, £15 to £20, was considered the cost of their ticket to America. Cabin passengers were charged but £6 6s., or about a third the sum that the servants would pay off with four years labor.

13 Stewart and Nesbitt to Vaughan, Hamilton & Co., July 26, 1783; Robert Alexander to Nesbitt, Oct. 18, 1783.
14 Ship *Favorite* account, 1783; ship *Favorite*, Disbursements at Cork, 1783.
15 Adam M. Stewart to Nesbitt, undated (February?) and Mar. 2, 1784; Nicholas Vallance to Nesbitt, Mar. 10, 1784; ship *Favorite* account, sale of servants, 1784.
While the Favorite lay at Port Penn, the William was making its way to Havana for the second time since its capture. Ninety-five gallons of rum, courtesy of Nesbitt and Stewart, had encouraged Benjamin Eyre and his carpenters to do extensive repairs including still another new deck. Paul Cox, her new master, held a quarter share this time, as did John Maxwell Nesbitt's company, Alexander Nesbitt's company, and Jonathan Nesbitt.\(^{16}\)

Stewart and Nesbitt were satisfied with their Havana trade despite constant threats that Spanish authorities might close the port to American shipping. When United States vessels were ordered out of Cuba in May, 1783, James Seagrove, the agent of Stewart and Nesbitt, confidentially wrote, "you need not fear for your vessels coming to me being admitted, but I advise your changing the names of vessels and captains who are now here."\(^{17}\) Seagrove's assurances were confirmed as the company continued to exchange Pennsylvania flour for Spanish dollars and sugar, and even managed to sell one of their smaller vessels.\(^{18}\) Then, just as the William entered port, the situation changed.

The governor of Cuba appeared determined to end all trade with America once and for all, and this time Seagrove believed him. American ships were ordered out of the harbor without discharging any cargo. The governor threatened American merchants with imprisonment and put them on a kind of parole. Nevertheless, five or six American ships tried unsuccessfully to land their cargoes under the pretext of making necessary repairs, and Seagrove probably had this ploy in mind when he asked government shipwrights to examine the William. Unable to land the tobacco, the agent reluctantly ordered the ship to Jamaica.\(^{19}\) At this point, Walter Stewart, on his first business trip, arrived in Havana aboard the Favorite.

Stewart had not yet heard from Seagrove. Confident about the continuance of the Cuban trade, he ignored warnings from a Charleston, South Carolina, correspondent.\(^{20}\) His main anxiety was on the

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\(^{16}\) Ship William accounts, 1783 and 1784.  
\(^{17}\) James Seagrove to Alexander Nesbitt, May 25, 1783.  
\(^{18}\) James Seagrove account, Mar. 27, 1784.  
\(^{19}\) Seagrove to Nesbitt, Mar. 16 and 26, 1784; Seagrove account, Aug. 1, 1784.  
\(^{20}\) Thomas Morris to Stewart, Oct. 13, 1783.
subject of selling the ship to a Spaniard so that she could be registered as a Spanish bottom regularly trading between Philadelphia and Havana. Not only was Stewart surprised by conditions in Havana, but also by the smallness of the balance owed to him in Seagrove's books, at least one-third less than expected. The Irishman, nevertheless, kept up his hopes, patiently awaiting the departure of the other American vessels from Havana. Then, armed with the honorary title of brevet general and several letters of introduction, he went to see the governor, who immediately agreed to issue purchase orders to his supply officer. Stewart took a month to travel about the island, and upon his return learned that no purchase orders had been given. May, June, and July, Stewart humbled himself before Spanish bureaucracy. The governor, cautious because the second ranking official in Cuba assiduously followed orders from Spain, was probably waiting until the flour shortage on the island was so severe that no one could criticize his action. The cargo of 2,200 barrels of flour was finally sold to the Cuban government at a net profit of $12.00 per barrel. Most of the money was reinvested in sugar; 12 per cent went to Adam Murry Stewart who had put money into the venture while visiting his brother in Philadelphia. Though successful, Walter Stewart confessed, "my very Soul recoils at the Idea of what I have gone through," and this was the last regular venture the company tried in Cuba.

A few months after his return home, Stewart left for Ireland with his wife and older son. A brief visit to relatives lengthened into a three-year stay as he sought to cultivate business connections throughout Europe. Nesbitt even encouraged him to find out what he could about the China trade. While Stewart sailed for Ireland, the Favorite carried a mixed cargo of flour, bread, iron, sugar and wagons to Charleston, South Carolina, where two of his brothers had recently opened their own mercantile establishment. But Robert and Hall Stewart's prospects were not promising; Hall was usually

21 Nesbitt to Stewart, Mar. 2, 1784; Stewart to Nesbitt, Apr. 7, 1784.
22 Stewart to Governor & Captain General, June 4, 8, and ?, 1784; Stewart to Nesbitt, Apr. 20, 1784; Juan Ignacio de Verriza to Stewart, Aug. 3, 1784; ship Favorite invoice, 1784.
23 Stewart to Nesbitt, July 10, 1784.
24 Stewart to Nesbitt, Nov. 22, 1784; Nesbitt to Stewart, May ?, 1785.
too ill to work and Robert preferred spending money to earning it. In fact, he had already proved an expensive liability to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co. After selling the Philadelphia cargo, Robert loaded the Favorite with rice, partly on the owners' account and partly on his own, and ordered the ship to the Amsterdam house of Samuel and Moses Myers, to whom he was heavily in debt. The Myers house failed just before the Favorite reached port.

The news of the Myers' bankruptcy drew Walter Stewart away from friends and relatives in Londonderry. As he had done in Cuba, he came to Amsterdam well prepared with letters of introduction. The respected Dutch firm of Nicholas and Jacob Van Straphorst agreed to handle the Favorite's cargo and extend credit to her owners in return for help in recovering wartime debts from Maryland correspondents. The Favorite's rice sold for just £600 more than Robert had paid for it in Charleston. Subtracting commissions and insurance, there was only "a very trifling profit," according to Stewart. Rumors of a European war briefly raised his hopes of selling the ship, but when peace prevailed, Stewart could not even find a freight for the return voyage. He advertised for people seeking passage to America and eventually the ship sailed with 230 servants and passengers. The large number of people, their water and provisions, left little space for cargo, but Captain Vallance did manage to squeeze 500 cases of gin aboard, and seventy tons of iron as ballast.

The single Dutch servants were quickly sold at about three times their cost when the Favorite returned home at the end of the summer, but no one wanted whole families. Rather than turn them over to agents, Stewart and Nesbitt kept them on the ship until the end of November and then simply freed them to cut costs and start preparations for another voyage. Alexander Nesbitt was understandably unhappy about the enterprise and discouraged that no one had purchased the vessel in Holland or the gin and iron at home. In spite of his partner's assurances of great profits to be culled at

26 Stewart to Nesbitt, Apr. 18, 1785; Nicholas and Jacob von Straphorst to Stewart, June 10, 1785.
27 Stewart to Nesbitt, June 2, 1785.
28 Stewart to Nesbitt, May 6 and June 2 and 14, 1785.
29 Nesbitt to Stewart, Sept. 30 and Nov. 29, 1785.
Amsterdam, Nesbitt filled the *Favorite* with flour and sent her to Bilbao, Spain.\(^{30}\)

Meanwhile, the *William* was on its second voyage to Jamaica. James Moore, the Kingston correspondent, consistently delayed payment on his debts and, when he later died bankrupt, was described by his brother-in-law as a thief.\(^{31}\) Southern Europe became the next target for exploration. Since American vessels entering the Mediterranean were subject to capture by North African pirates, Nesbitt secured safe conduct by means of a “Mediterranean pass,” usually issued only to British vessels. After changing the *William*’s name to *Success*, Nesbitt apparently was able to secure false registration papers, the dubious nature of which was perhaps the cause of Captain Cox’s resignation. At first, Cox’s suspicions seemed justified, for, after taking flour and codfish to Madeira, the ship was seized by British warships for trade violations and taken to England.\(^{32}\) Rather than await his appearance in the Court of Admiralty, which had already decided against a New England ship caught in similar circumstances, Stewart procured new documents, this time furnished by Jonathan Nesbitt from L’Orient.\(^{33}\) Whatever Stewart did must have been right, for the *William/Success* was released and returned to Philadelphia.

Preparing the ship more carefully for its next voyage, the owners had several spars lengthened and furnished her with larger sails; the bowsprit was raised and attached in a different fashion, and a figurehead and trailboards were added to the bow. The ship’s entire crew was replaced, except for her new master, John Cadencehead. Cox was persuaded to sell his share, and because of the change in ownership a new American register was secured.\(^{34}\) Thus, the *William* underwent a true metamorphosis into the *Success* and even Nesbitt began to use the ship’s official name more regularly in business records and correspondence. Officially departing for the

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\(^{30}\) Stewart to Nesbitt, June 2, 1785; Outward Entries, Dec. 17, 1785, Philadelphia Custom House Records.


\(^{32}\) Nesbitt to Stewart, Mar. 15, 1785; ship *William* account, Mar. 30, 1785.

\(^{33}\) Stewart to Nesbitt, June 24 and July 5, 1785.

\(^{34}\) Seamen’s Articles, Mar. 16 and Dec. 25, 1785; ship *William* accounts, June 30–Sept. 11, 1785; Nesbitt to Stewart, Sept. 6, 1785; Outward Entries, Sept. 20, 1785, Philadelphia Custom House Records.
Dutch island of St. Eustatius in the early fall of 1785, the *Success* made a quick passage to Dominica.

By late 1785, the British island of Dominica had replaced Cuba as the center of the company’s West Indian commerce. There were laws against United States ships, but James Blair, the correspondent on the island, advised Nesbitt and Stewart merely to order their captains upon arrival to “hoist a Red Jack in which case we shall immediately ... make the Necessary Arrangements & ... endeavour to evade the force of any Restrictions upon American Vessels.”

When the brig *Greyhound* landed for the second time in May, 1784, Blair had an English registration already prepared, and in due course he found an English register for the *Success* as well.

The speed of the *Success* was well demonstrated the next year, during which she completed four Dominican voyages, the third in only twenty-six days of actual sailing with sixty-two days in port. The first voyage was the best with an 8.5 per cent profit on flour and wood and a cargo of coffee and cocoa which sold at home for 25 per cent profit. Most important to the owners were the 4,000 Spanish dollars delivered into Nesbitt’s hands by John Cadenhead.

Subsequent voyages never lived up to this standard: the next time the *Success* landed her cargo of flour had spoiled and it was just by luck that Blair, all the while criticizing the master for not airing it properly, managed to sell the flour for £1 less than it cost to purchase and deliver, and the next two voyages offered a flooded market with no extra profit earned by carrying goods for other merchants. The swiftness of the *Success* actually served little purpose for there were no enemies to leave behind, the market changed and the cargo still spoiled.

At the end of 1786, James Blair left Dominica to make a brief visit to New York and Philadelphia. Nesbitt chose this time to

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35 Morson, Blair & Co. to Nesbitt, Jan. 22, 1784.
38 Ship *Success* account, first Dominica voyage; James Blair to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., Oct. 22, 1785; John Cadenhead receipt, Nov. 5, 1785.
send the *Success* off to Ireland. John Maxwell Nesbitt’s partner had a close friend who happened to be Collector of Customs for Kellybega on the northwest Irish coast. Carrying barrel staves and flaxseed, the *Success* was supposed to arrive at Kellybega with both her American and British registers aboard. Walter Stewart would be there to overcome any possible obstacles. With the help of the friendly customs official, the *Success* would take on a cargo of mackerel and clear for Dominica where Blair, back from his trip, could exchange the fish for coffee, which had to arrive in Philadelphia by April or May to take advantage of a current shortage. It all seemed well planned.

The Delaware River froze early that year and delayed the departure for several weeks. When the *Success* neared Ireland in early February, she was struck by a heavy sea which carried away part of her stern; her small crew of Captain Cadenhead, two mates, six or eight seamen, and a few boys, were hard pressed just to keep her afloat. Twice they worked the ship near shore and twice fresh gales drove her away again. Just as the third attempt was failing, a pilot and five men from shore managed to reach them. Several days later, an exhausted group of seamen brought the *Success* into the small port of Rutland on the south shore of Donegal Bay, where the crew of another vessel loaned them a spare anchor and cable. Cadenhead gratefully distributed twenty gallons of rum to his men and the others who had saved his ship.

Walter Stewart was dining at a friend’s home when he learned of the trouble. Suffering from illness and tied down by business affairs in the pleasant city of Dublin, he appointed a young dinner companion and flaxseed merchant, Will Stewart, to look after the ship. Will Stewart discovered that the safe harbor of Rutland was an economic backwater with no merchants or even stores. He located officials to inspect the damage and forward reports to Fletcher, Son & Westby of London who would begin negotiations with the insurance underwriters. To get the flaxseed to market quickly, as the selling season was at hand, he hired two local boats to carry it to the nearby market town of Sligo, but their capacity proved in-

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41 Fletcher, Son & Westby to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., Mar. 7, 1787; ship *Success*, account at Rutland, May 13, 1787.
adequate and Will Stewart traveled to Kellybegs to hire a third vessel, only to find that masters would not charter their unemployed ships without waiting for written consent from their distant owners. Moreover, customs clearance was difficult to secure, and bad weather continued, so that the flaxseed did not arrive at Sligo until early May. Because he was a stranger, Will Stewart prudently hired a young local merchant who managed to sell both damaged and undamaged goods at average prices. They received little help from Walter Stewart who had unrealistic visions of suddenly finding a buyer for the vessel, or profiting from full insurance payments, or even finding passengers for the Success at Rutland. Meanwhile, Will Stewart and Cadenhead labored to make temporary repairs by using equipment from other vessels in the harbor. When the ship was finally ready, storms delayed her departure for nearly three weeks. At the end of May, when she was scheduled to arrive in Philadelphia with desirable West Indian coffee, the empty Success entered Liverpool where her hull could be thoroughly repaired.42

Birch & Leay, the Liverpool correspondents of Stewart and Nesbitt, informed the merchants that the American origin and recent repairs of the Success made her sale in Britain impossible. In fact, they could not even find new insurance for her.43 As was customary, the Success had been insured for £750, or three-quarters of her total value exclusive of cargo. By managing to stay afloat, she actually became less valuable than if she had sunk, for the underwriters eventually paid 45 per cent of the insurance policy, £300 less than the company paid for repairs. On the barrel staves, the profit was £24. Insurance underwriters got the sale of the damaged flaxseed and the undamaged flaxseed made only a small profit, as did freighting for other merchants. Against this was almost £700 spent in Philadelphia preparing for the voyage.44 It isn’t surprising that the Success never returned to the British isles.

42 Will Stewart to Adam Murry Stewart, Mar. 3, 1787; Will Stewart to Walter Stewart, Mar. 6 and 29, May 10, 1787; Will Stewart to Adam Murry Stewart, May 5, 1787; Will Stewart to Walter Stewart, Apr. 5, 1787; John Cadenhead to Walter Stewart, May 7 and June 2, 1787; ship Success account at Rutland, May 13, 1787.
43 Birch & Leay to Alexander Nesbitt, July 7, 1787.
44 Fletcher, Son & Westby to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., Feb. 2, Apr. 4, and July 23, 1787; Will Stewart to Walter Stewart, May 10, 1787; ship Success account at Rutland, May 13, 1787; ship Success disbursements for Kellybegs voyage.
The Favorite had her share of misfortune as well. Sailing for Bilbao at the end of 1785, severe winter storms battered her, blew her mizzen mast overboard, left her leaking amidst contrary winds. Captain Vallance altered her course for the West Indies and landed at Barbados. Apparently, a Philadelphia master who had traded at that island had recently published a derogatory account of Barbadians which had reached the island just before the Favorite. Irate islanders patiently waited until after the Captain had unloaded his flour to cut the anchor cable and set his ship adrift. Unable to recover the flour, Vallance and the crew rushed aboard and found refuge at St. Eustatius. They didn’t reach Bilbao until the following year.45

The Favorite continued profitable trading with Spain, which helped her owners pay for goods from Amsterdam and London. On one occasion, the ship remained in Cadiz an extra month for possible sale to government officials, but the sale never came through. Later, the Favorite turned to regular trade with Dominica.46 The Success started out with more bad luck as she ran into storms near Antigua, which made short work of her Liverpool repairs.47 But she, too, became a Spanish trader for a while, exchanging flour and barrel staves for salt or wine. In May, 1793, with war breaking out in Europe and swift vessels once more in demand, the company was able to sell the Success for £800, not a bad price considering her record.48

The careers of the William/Success and the Favorite are not typical of all of Stewart and Nesbitt’s trade, or these successful merchants might have gone bankrupt. Rather, they show efforts during peacetime to use wartime vessels to their best advantage. Obviously, ships designed for war found peace a handicap. Their speed turned out useless and their comparatively small cargo capacity repelled prospective buyers. Such ships were used to help

45 Nesbitt to Stewart, Mar. 3 and Dec. 17, 1786.
47 John Cadenhead to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., Mar. 8, 1788.
48 John Cadenhead to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., Apr. 25, 1788; Fletcher, Son & Westby to Stewart, Nesbitt & Co., July 12, 1788; ship Success account, Dec. 23, 1788–May 18, 1793.
the owners seek out the best post-war trades. Spain and Holland were visited, as were several Irish ports; some curiosity was shown in opening new territories such as China and the East Indies; France and the Spanish colonies, popular markets during the Revolutionary war, continued to be a source of revenue, at least for a time. But the merchants showed they were more comfortable trading with Britain and her colonies by repeating their efforts in those pre-war trades most consistently. The vessels frequented West Indian and European waters, but never stayed on a particular route more than two years. Actually, these Philadelphia merchants never resolved the problem of securing one regular profitable trade. The outbreak of war in Europe changed conditions for them.

Some of the problems the ships' owners confronted were common to all eighteenth-century merchants: damaged vessels, uncollected debts, rapidly changing markets, frequent bankruptcy of correspondents, inconsistent business performance of relatives and connections. The obstacle specific to the decade following the Revolution, the Navigation Acts, did not seem to bother Nesbitt and Stewart excessively. Whether motivated by visions of prize money or a patriotic desire to enforce the Navigation Acts, or both, naval officers like Horatio Nelson seized American vessels with British registers. Even with papers, ships could not pass without the good will of friendly officials and capable correspondents. It seems the ability of Americans to secure British registers has been underestimated by some observers, while others have overestimated the value of such papers. Although they evaded registration laws, Nesbitt and Stewart generally avoided smuggling, and a great deal of their trade was within the legal boundaries of the Navigation Acts. Thus, it may be concluded that the frustrations of their search for new trades or efforts to re-establish old ones grew as much from normal business problems as from the obstacles set up by Parliament and European colonial powers.

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