The Polly: A Perspective on Merchant Stephen Girard

Stephen Girard, Philadelphia's preeminent early nineteenth-century merchant, was a compulsive record keeper. The hundreds of thousands of documents he left provide an extraordinarily detailed account of trading activity in post-Revolutionary America. The collection of materials is so voluminous that it almost defeats analysis. However, study of the eighteen voyages by one of his vessels, the Polly, between 1789 and 1794, offers insight into the life of her remarkable owner, gives a peek through the historical porthole into Philadelphia's merchant community, provides analysis of West Indies trading in the infant United States, and uncovers a fascinating adventure story.

To chart the Polly's voyages and read her records is to wonder about those pulling her many ropes. Her owner, Stephen Girard, was thirty-eight years old when he bought the Polly in 1789. He had been born in Bordeaux, France, to a family of West Indies traders, and he sailed as a boy on a number of West Indian voyages. After quarreling with his father, Girard migrated to North America, and settled in Philadelphia in 1776. He started his business career in the Quaker city by buying underpriced commodities, storing them in rented warehouses until prices increased and selling them at large profits to the Continental Army. Girard lived and breathed his business, and by 1788 had amassed the small fortune of £20,681. With a disfigured eye and a difficult personality, Girard's personal life was less successful. Girard had married in 1777, but his marriage was a disaster. He neglected his wife for his business. She became insane, whereupon Girard had her committed to the Pennsylvania Hospital. In 1791 she would give birth to a daughter which Girard refused to acknowledge. Within months both mother and child had died.

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In April 1789 Girard entered into a relationship that he would describe to his brother in more endearing terms than his own marriage. "Jean," he wrote, "I have decided to buy a charming little brigantine . . . the figure of a woman is the figure head." And with parental pride he added: "I have ordered the captain to announce himself, by attaching a broad blue pennant to the fore-top mast." Girard had reason to be excited. He could sense that American merchants were entering into a new era of prosperity. Previously, America's international trading pattern had been directed by English rules, taxed by restrictive levies, and subject to the risks of a hundred years of Anglo-French and Anglo-Spanish wars. Now, with the British evicted and a failed harvest in France, demand for American food and staples rose in both Europe and the West Indies. In 1789 Philadelphia merchant John Lewis observed with relief: "Philadelphia seems to enjoy a better trade at present than it has done for some time past." When he bought the Polly, Girard saw these opportunities. "As regards this venture," he wrote, "I am entering it in the firm conviction that the ports of the French Islands will be open to Americans for the introduction of flour."

The Polly was a brigantine, the trading ship of choice for West Indian and European trade, with two or more square sails on the foremast and a fore and aft sail on the main mast. This English design held the advantage of increased tonnage over both coasting sloops and schooners, averaging from "half again to more than double the tonnage" of these older ships. Although slower and less maneuverable than the smaller trading ships, the Polly offered affordability and large holding capacity.

To command his new ship, Girard enlisted William Edger, a captain familiar with the West Indies. Rather than contract for a commission on each voyage, Girard offered a straight salary of 7 pounds, 10 shillings a month. Here he broke with colonial tradition.

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Previously, the captains of trading ships held "a virtually discretionary power over their destination among the islands," would travel "odysseys" in search of suitable markets, and had "much latitude in the prices at which they might sell their cargo." But Girard, having a brother in the French sugar colony of St. Domingue acting as his agent, did not want his captains to scurry from island to island looking for high prices. Jean and Stephen kept regular contact: Jean would advise or forecast the market and Stephen would acquire and send the cargo with explicit instructions for the return lading. Thus, Girard did not have to rely upon the customary international "network" of merchants who traded on potentially inaccurate market prices.

This method offered Girard other significant advantages. First, by restricting Edger's authority to the management of the ship and Jean's to the sale of the cargo, he maximized the usefulness of each. Second, by instructing Edger to travel directly to St. Domingue, he reduced the length of time of individual journeys, allowing more trips per year. Third, since Jean owned a warehouse in St. Domingue, were the Polly to arrive when markets were depressed, its cargo could be stored until prices rose.

The first Girard venture was launched with both Stephen Girard and Captain Edger rushing into their respective duties in the third week of April 1789, just nine days after Girard had marked the ship as his. Edger hired a carpenter, a block and pump maker, and a blacksmith to prepare the Polly for its first "Adventure," as Girard grew fond of calling the trips. Edger also bought varnish, canvas, twine, and provisions. Girard was equally busy, purchasing 114 terces and 19 halves of rice, 304 barrels of flour, and 109 kegs of lard. By the late 1780s, foodstuff exporters in Philadelphia had so specialized and expanded that Girard could purchase large shipments of flour and rice. With his brother's warehouse and West Indian connections, he was virtually assured of a market for his cargo.

Equally important was the acquisition of insurance. For this voyage

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6 Wildes, *Lonely Midas*, 34.
Girard used Wharton and Lewis, one of the standard carriers in Philadelphia. He insured the ship for its purchase price of £700, and the cargo for £1,300. The price of the policy was 9 percent or £63.5 for the ship, and 5 percent or £65.5 for the goods. This covered the vessel for a single round-trip voyage to St. Domingue, assuming the trip was completed within six months. After that period the penalty was 1.5 percent per month. The policy was underwritten by a large number of speculators, each of whom signed the document.

As April turned to May and final repairs and provisions were secured, Girard wrote letters of instruction to his brother and Captain Edger. To Jean he specified that the return cargo should be molasses, coffee, and cocoa. If there were any delay in getting these items, the Polly was to be sent back in ballast. Exporting flour rapidly, Stephen felt, would be the profit-making leg of the adventure. Any importation would merely add a bonus.\(^8\) To Captain Edger, he provided even more explicit instructions. As the importation of flour was prohibited in St. Domingue (thus making Girard a smuggler), Girard had to prepare for the possibility that the vessel would be stopped and searched. If the Polly were to meet a “guarda costa or others,” he wrote Edger, and the crew were asked what the cargo contained, say “flour, rice and lard,” but add that “you are bound for St. Thomas, but having the misfortune of falling to the lower of your port, together with your vessel being deep loading you did propose to sell your rice at Cap François.”\(^9\) Otherwise, Edger was simply to meet Jean Girard at the wharf and hand him his sealed instructions, remaining under Jean’s command while in port.

On May 11, 1789, the Polly left Philadelphia, was piloted down the Delaware to Cape Henlopen at the mouth of the river, and sailed to the West Indies, arriving eighteen days later (May 29) at Cap François. To Captain Edger’s pleasant surprise, the port was open to flour, and Jean sold the cargo for seven to ten dollars a barrel (Girard’s buying price was a little more than five). The rice (bought at $2.69) he sold between $3.50 and $4.00 a quintal. The sales grossed almost £1,900. After deducting for all shipping expenses, Girard realized a net profit of £200 to £300 on the Polly’s first outward journey. He

\(^8\) McMaster, *Life and Times of Stephen Girard*, 1:91.

\(^9\) Ibid.
would entirely pay off the cost of the vessel in three such one-way trips.

Even with this proud rate of return, Jean wrote back a pessimistic letter. “It is unfortunate,” he bemoaned, “that your brig arrived three days late as that made a difference in the sales of from eight to ten thousand livres.”

He sent back forty thousand livres in specie, a small shipment of molasses, and the good news that the governor-general of St. Domingue had extended the time during which flour might be legally imported until the first of October. The first adventure was completed rapidly. Edger set sail from Cap François just a few days after the ship’s arrival, and within three weeks the Polly was back in Philadelphia. Girard was already preparing for the second trip.

Girard had hoped to get his ship back to St. Domingue by July 1, but when the first week in June passed and the ship had not yet arrived, this hope deflated. Armed with the news of continued legal shipment of flour, coupled with the high selling prices, Girard bought more this time: 547 barrels, as well as Indian meal, rice, lard, and ham. Edger rehired his seven-man crew, which included a first mate, cook, four sailors, and Sam, a black slave. He used day laborers and the crew to recondition the ship rapidly for another voyage. He bought sails, rope, a yawl (or ship’s boat), and provisions including two barrels of beef and some white beans. The entire overhaul took less than three days, and on June 22, just a month and eleven days after the first embarkation, the Polly was piloted out of Philadelphia’s harbor.

This adventure was even more successful than the first. “The brig arrived in just 19 days,” Edger bragged, “and there is a good market for the cargo of flour and rice.”

Stephen Girard had bought his cargo for about £1,472; Jean sold it for over £2,200. Allowing for sailing costs and insurance, Girard netted over £500 from this trip. The Polly, in two months time and as many voyages, had paid for itself entirely. All additional trips were profit.

10 Ibid., 1:92
11 Edger letter in The Stephen Girard Papers (microfilm) Roll 128, 1790 (56) (American Philosophical Society). All references to the Girard Papers are based on the American Philosophical Society’s microfilm collection (copied in 1968 from the originals at Girard College), and refer to the microfilm roll and date.
Edger advanced the crew a month’s pay while at Cap François, and this practice represented another departure from mercantile customs. Other traders usually paid their sailors a combination of wage and “privilege,” “the right to load so many barrels or hogsheads on the outward and homeward voyage on the sailors’ own account.” This practice “was nearly universal, and it looks as though the privilege was considered more important than the money wage.” Presumably, Girard did not want his men more concerned with their own ladings than with his. He paid them a straight salary to perform their specific duties. In mid-July 1789, Edger started the return voyage. Jean had loaded it this time with a larger return cargo: 56 casks of molasses, 11 barrels of sugar, and 53 barrels and 84 bags of coffee. On July 30, the Polly landed at Philadelphia.

For the third adventure, Stephen Girard decided to load his ship entirely with flour; he bought 659 barrels and 163 half-barrels. Again, such a practice was practically unheard of; it would have been entirely too risky for most merchants to load a ship with only one commodity. Edger hired an entirely new crew, keeping on Sam alone. Perhaps because of the unique salary arrangements, or because of the rapidity with which the Polly performed, sailors usually did not stay in Edger’s employ for more than a single voyage. But maritime labor was plentiful in early Philadelphia, and Girard apparently had no problem manning vessels at his rate of pay. After the two quick trips, the Polly needed a more complete overhaul. The vessel was scraped and oil-painted. A blacksmith, a carpenter, a joiner, and a block maker were all hired, and laborers were paid by the half-day. The old anchor was traded in for a new one, and rigging leather was purchased. Finally, Edger bought the provisions: two barrels each of pork and beef, some white beans, a box of candles, some cheese and rum. On August 21, the Polly took to sea.

This adventure was a slight disappointment when compared with the first two. Jean wrote that flour prices were low on account of “political changes in France” that were affecting the market. When all was sold, Stephen probably made only £100 profit on the leg. In the middle of October, 1789, Edger arrived back in Philadelphia.

He brought a letter from Jean, informing Stephen that “flour will be a prohibited article [again] after December 1.” Jean hinted about the possibility of smuggling it through: “I will then advise how it may be brought in.”

By the time Edger arrived with the note, Stephen had already purchased flour for the Polly’s fourth trip. He quickly added an assortment of sundries to this load: the wine, liquor, and silver requested by agents in St. Domingue for their own use. Edger docked for only three days and was off again on October 25. He arrived in St. Domingue to find another disappointing market. Flour prices had dipped again; the Girards probably took a small loss on this trip when all expenses were counted. Because of the setback, Jean held the Polly in port for two weeks while he waited to close negotiations for a full return cargo. Prices on exports as well as imports were down, and he thought he could arrange for cheap coffee and sugar. Evidently, he was successful. The Polly left the West Indies with 58 barrels and 108 bags of coffee, and 61 hogsheads of molasses. As was now standard practice, Edger manipulated figures on the bills of lading from St. Domingue, reducing his apparent cargo and paying less tax.

When Edger returned the ship to Philadelphia in the middle of December, Stephen faced the fact that further shipments of flour to St. Domingue were now prohibited. Additionally, the latest letter from Jean forecasted political trouble at Le Cap. “The young people,” he wrote impassionately, “are greatly excited, and gather at public places and at theatres.” The Negroes were growing restive, and the people were “clamoring for local self-government.” Other independent reports confirmed the warning Jean sent his brother: “The government is helpless,” he wrote, “and civil war is impending.”

Since Jean did not foresee any improvement for politics or profits in the West Indies, Stephen decided that he would transfer Edger and the Polly to the “Marseilles route” already sailed by another of his ships, Les Deux Frères. Unfortunately, he was sending his ship from one trouble spot to another. In France, the Old Regime was beginning to collapse. At Versailles, the Third Estate of the Estates

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13 Girard Papers, Roll 128, 1790 (114), 9/24.
14 Ibid., Roll 128, 1790 (148), 11/16.
15 McMaster, Life and Times of Stephen Girard, 1:95.
General had refused to be seated apart from the clergy and nobility, and on June 17, 1789, had independently declared itself the National Assembly. Simultaneously, crops were failing in France and a shortage of wheat developed. M. Samatan, Girard’s French agent, urged him to “buy wheat and nothing but wheat.”

So Girard bought wheat for sale in France: 681 full barrels, and 62 halves of superfine flour. Stephen was anxious to get this long and important journey underway. He had Edger hire twelve men to load the ship, and he bought insurance, securing the cargo for £1,600 and the ship for £700 at the rate of 2.5 percent. This policy was amended by additional coverage “Against Capture and Seizure By Algerines, Moors or any of the Piratical States of Barbary or Morocco.” Girard instructed Edger to dock at Marseilles, give the enclosed letters to Samatan, unload the cargo, and follow the agents’ instructions. On December 23, Girard watched as the Polly was piloted down the Delaware. On February 25, 1790, two months after the Polly left Cape Henlopen, Samatan sent Girard a letter informing him of his ship’s arrival. It was April 21 before she set sail again for Philadelphia. The trip back was tedious. On June 8, Samatan wrote to report that the Polly had been forced “by contrary winds” to seek refuge in Malaga after having suffered some damage in a storm and had resumed her homeward journey on May 21.

While the Polly was overseas in France, Stephen and Jean quarreled over the amount of commission due from her last voyage to the Indies. When the Polly had docked in St. Domingue, Jean had stored the cargo, as prices were rising. Since his own warehouse was currently occupied, he rented space in a competitor’s and charged Stephen for that rent. Stephen refused to pay this surplus and dismissed Jean as his agent. Jean was furious and remained so for some time.

Meanwhile the Polly had returned to Philadelphia. Girard marked a profit of £560 on the long French adventure, but had grown uncertain during the ship’s absence about future trips to the continent. His French agents were now advising caution and the new agents he had hired in Cap François, the firm of Aubert and Rouch, were urging him to resume flour shipments to St. Domingue.

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 1:106.
Captain Edger bought a new sail and provisions for his return to the Caribbean. In the first half of August Girard purchased 775 barrels and 80 halves of flour, and 38 kegs of butter. On August 16, 1790, the *Polly* left Philadelphia, arriving at Cap François on September 16. The agents had more bad news. The price of flour had dropped—temporarily, they hoped—so the present shipment was stored. They were optimistic for the future and still encouraged the shipping of flour. Edger left Cap François on October 6, and arrived in Philadelphia on October 22 with a return cargo of sugar and coffee.

Girard exercised restraint for the next voyage. With flour prices down abroad, he waited for the cheapest buying price in Philadelphia. Edger took the opportunity to overhaul the vessel, having it scraped and repainted. Additionally, he bought new dishes for the crew (a half dozen cups and saucers, 3 half-pint mugs, 3 half-pint tumblers, and a quart mug—all for £9) and ten gallons of rum “for provisions.” After consigning a new crew and loading the 762 barrels and 30 halves of flour, and 60 tierces of lard Girard had bought, Edger left the Wharf Street dock, arriving at Cape Henlopen on November 11. From there he penned optimistically, “The *Polly* is going out to sea with a fine breeze and a good crew.”

Jacques Aubert, Girard’s new agent in St. Domingue, had already prepared for the ship’s arrival. He had “engaged 27 hogshead of syrup and raw sugar” and planned to load the cargo and dispatch it for Charleston, South Carolina, as the two had agreed earlier. They were acting on information that West Indian goods would fetch a higher price in Charleston. The *Polly* arrived in Cap François on December 4, and left on the 9th. The market was still poor, and the cargo was again stored. Girard had told Edger to report to a Mr. Kirk, his Charleston agent. Stephen advised caution because “the protection of your voyages . . . is essentially necessary for my interest.”

This side trip to Charleston turned out to be a mistake. Edger arrived just before the new year to find another unfavorable market. Kirk’s partners explained to Girard that “as several vessels arrived

18 Girard Papers, Roll 198, 1790 (203).
19 Ibid., Roll 198, 1790 (214), 11/21.
20 Ibid., Roll 138, 1790, November.
They temporarily stored Edger's cargo, but after the Polly left they reshipped it aboard another Girard vessel. Meanwhile, the Polly returned from Charleston to Cap François, loaded with 273 casks of Carolina rice, and 7 casks of indigo. On February 25, 1791, Edger arrived at Cap François. After Aubert received this cargo, and quickly loaded a return shipment of sugar and coffee, the Polly was ready to sail back to Philadelphia. But at the last minute, an angry and malicious Jean Girard prevented the ship from leaving. "Immediately upon the arrival of your brigantine," agent Aubert would explain to Stephen, "your brother . . . took the precaution to file a protest . . . against the ship's return." Jean met the surprised agents with his books in hand to prove that Stephen owed him money.

What the resentful brother had in mind was blackmail. "If you do not . . . pay me the 1725 livres which the Sieur Stephen Girard lawfully owes me," read Jean's ransom note, "I have decided to denounce the brig Polly, to expose you to the payment of a fine, and your correspondent to considerable loss." After a lengthy list of demands, Jean revealed his trump card: "P.S.," he added, "The official declaration [in the Polly's present bill of lading] calls for 180 quintals of sugar and 7500 pounds of coffee, which is quite different from the cargo, which consists of at least 380 quintals of sugar and 20,000 pounds of coffee." To Aubert's shock, the letter was accurate. Somehow Jean had discovered the intentional discrepancy and was threatening to reveal the fraud to the authorities. "What," asked agent Jean Baptiste Rouch in resignation, "was to be done in such a contingency?" The ship could not sail with the protest outstanding; the cargo had already been loaded and inspected; and the false documents had been filed with the custom house. "We therefore did not hesitate to sacrifice the 1725 livres, . . . and accordingly paid him the said sum at once." Aubert and Rouch discovered that Jean had uncovered their bribes with a larger one of his own, leading them to conclude that their bribes on behalf of Stephen must be increased.

21 Ibid., Roll 138, 1791 (2).
22 McMaster, Life and Times of Stephen Girard, 1:106.
23 Ibid., 1:115-16.
24 Ibid., 1:117.
“We are inclined to think that this is so, and that it is absolutely necessary to prevent a like occurrence in the future.”

Finally, the *Polly* returned to Philadelphia on April 22, 1791. Edger had the ship quickly renovated and was out to sea in nine days. The cargo was flour, and although the St. Domingue market had improved in the interim, times were scarce again. “There has never been anything like it,” cried the agents. “What is even more astonishing is that we have not been able to collect the price of a single barrel of flour of the last two cargoes.” Worse, the agents warned of increasing racial unrest. “Our National Assembly is meditating the passing of a decree placing all colored persons born of free parents on an equality with whites. The people of this colony are resolved not to accept this law.”

In France, the revolutionary National Assembly had drafted in 1789 a “Declaration of the Rights of Man,” that attacked slavery in all the French colonies. Aubert was observing the tropical reception of this decree.

When the *Polly* returned to Philadelphia with this ominous news, Girard decided that the risks of arranging his own cargoes to St. Domingue had become too great. He had found an investor willing to pay for the consigned use of the *Polly*, and would try this arrangement for one voyage, calculating that if prices were so low, and political tempers high, it was more prudent to accept the guaranteed profits than risk loss. Besides, when the ship was entirely loaded with the consigned cargo, there was still room for Girard to include eighteen green dining chairs for some brave friends in the Indies.

Captain Edger consigned a new crew, had the ship overhauled, bought provisions, and on July 8, 1791, left Philadelphia, arriving at Cap François on August 8. From there he was sent to the city of Port-au-Prince, where a return shipment was waiting. Edger wrote Girard on August 17 confirming his arrival at Port-au-Prince; this was the last that Girard would hear from St. Domingue for a month. On August 23, 1791, the slaves rose against the white planters, killing hundreds in a violent insurrection.

For years the French colony of St. Domingue, which produced more sugar than any other Caribbean colony, had been teetering on

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25 Ibid., 1:118.
26 Ibid., 1:120.
the edge of political and social disorder. Both the white and black populations were divided. The "old guard" white planters feared the French government's threat to emancipate the black slaves, while other "enlightened whites" favored some social change. The mulattoes were intermittently excluded and accepted by both the whites and the blacks. When the Parisian National Assembly granted blacks the same voting rights as whites in the colony, rumor immediately spread that the local governing body, the Colonial Assembly, would rescind these promises on August 25, 1791. The blacks were distraught, and two days before the scheduled meeting they revolted, killing several hundred white planters and burning their opulent estates. After a long period of deadly silence, Girard received a report from Aubert. "An insurrection of the slaves took place August 23rd and from Point Margot to Limonade . . . every plantation has been burned and all the whites massacred. No words can describe the horrors committed by them."27

The Polly had escaped the holocaust and arrived in Philadelphia in late October 1791 with the first of many refugees, a Mr. Dartis and his family. Girard charged them £54 for passage and baggage and an additional £54 for their six servants. Despite the revolution that shook St. Domingue, Aubert sent letters urging Girard to continue sending shipments. The government had started buying flour at competitive prices, and his warehouse had, at last, been emptied. Edger, as usual, contracted for repairs in his home port, and Girard opted for a more diverse cargo: flour, rice, lard, and bread. Again optimistic about favorable markets, Edger wrote happily from Cape Henlopen on December 17: "With a good crew, I am going out to sea." On January 7, 1792, he arrived at Cap François.

When Edger reached St. Domingue, the agents informed Girard of his arrival, and also of new rises in prices. The letter read like a series of newspaper headlines and was among the most positive Girard had ever received. "Gov't purchasing flour, salt, beef, and pork—and offering drafts on French Treasury in payment," jotted Aubert. He continued, the "National Assembly appropriated 30 million for our aid—French merchants make every effort to retain rich colony.

27 Girard Papers, Roll 129, 1791 (182), 9/11.
Gov't needs 200 bbls. flour, 300 bbls salt, beef, or pork/month.” In March, after being detained to load on a full return cargo, the Polly carried this note to Philadelphia, completing its eleventh round-trip voyage. Girard had owned the ship for almost three years now, and it had made a profit for him of several times its value. All that time it had traveled under a single captain, William Edger, but now Edger decided to retire from Girard’s service. The non-stop traveling and recent uprising had taken their toll on the weary sailor. Such matters, it seems, evoked neither undue sentiment nor remorse on Stephen Girard’s part. That very month he transferred another captain, John Charnock, from the Marseilles route to the Polly.

Captain Charnock completed five generally successful West Indian adventures for Girard between March 1792 and May 1793. He was a speedy navigator and succeeded in making his first voyage from the mouth of the Delaware to Cap François in only twelve days. Flour prices, and the agents’ dispositions, remained high during that time as a force of 6,000 French troops, recruited to maintain peace on the volatile island, were fed with imported goods. Despite the soldiers, Girard continued to receive disturbing reports of political and social unrest. At the beginning of June 1792, he was informed that the Colonial Assembly had been forced to ratify the National Assembly’s decree granting equal rights to whites, mulattoes, and free blacks. Nevertheless, the governor of the island persisted in his denunciations of the black rebels, calling for “a white attack on the brigands.”

With increasing frequency, Girard smuggled goods aboard the Polly, often arranging for Charnock to carry two sets of lading documents and instructing his agents to offer custom house officers “a few portugaises to silence them.” So pleased were the agents with the profits they were turning that they began sending Girard delicacies as presents with his cargoes. One letter to Girard in 1792 ended with this postscript: “I will try to send you pineapples and oranges, but scarce since negro insurrection. I have ordered some turtles for you as Mr. Heraud says you are fond of them.”

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28 Ibid., Roll 129, 1792 (131), 6/18.
29 Ibid., Roll 129, 1792 (251), 9/14.
30 Ibid.
During the fifteenth adventure, in late November 1792, Charnock wrote a note to Girard informing him of an unusually "bad market."31 "There is bad weather," Aubert added ominously, "and more trouble with the negroes. This has caused us to detain the Polly." In December Girard was sent an update. "The negroes have been subdued and four exiled. . . . Today [the Polly] sailed."32 But at the beginning of 1793, Jean Girard, with whom relations had been mended, wrote pessimistically: "The country is in a deplorable condition. The law has no force and the blacks are in control." Later Jean's assessment was amended by Aubert who wrote that a force of French troops was to continue its march against the brigands. The situation remained uncertain through May 1793 when, after the sixteenth adventure had been completed, Captain Charnock approached Girard and requested a vacation from the treacherous West Indies run. He was immediately replaced by John Congdon.

As Girard was securing a cargo of 722 barrels and 61 halves of superfine flour, 7 casks of almonds, and 20 baskets of sweet oil, Congdon was contracting for smith work and block repairs. On the evening of June 12, the Polly was led out of Philadelphia's harbor and set sail for the West Indies. It arrived at Cap François on July 3 to find the city in ashes and hundreds of her citizens murdered.33

The events that led to this ultimate devastation had begun two years previously, after the August 1791 massacre. France had sent over 6,000 troops and three new commissioners to secure the colony, dissolve the Assembly, and replace the reigning governor. Two of these commissioners, Sonthonax and Polverel, attempted to restore order in St. Domingue by allying with the mulattoes and free blacks against the counter-revolutionary whites. When France declared war on Great Britain in February 1793, a new military governor was sent to protect the colony. The governor immediately clashed with the commissioners, who mustered a force of mulatto troops and ordered him back to France. He recruited two thousand white seamen to help him defend his right to rule, and the commissioners called upon Macaya, the leader of a group of rebel blacks, for support. Macaya

31 Ibid., Roll 129, 1792 (353), 11/26.
32 Ibid., Roll 129, 1792 (367), 12/7, 12/8.
33 McMaster, Life and Times of Stephen Girard, 7:192.
complied in his own manner, arriving at Cap Français with several thousand renegades and proceeding to slaughter whites indiscriminately. Hundreds of whites fled to the waterfront to escape the invasion only to be met by the mulattoes, who cut off their retreat. The blacks stormed the city, plundering and setting fire to property and killing many whites. The governor fled for his life alongside hundreds of now penniless refugees.\textsuperscript{34}

Stephen Girard responded to the first news of the massacre with uncharacteristic concern for his agents. "After such a disaster," he offered, "I will ask you, as a true friend, to wind up your own affairs and mine and take advantage of my Polly, if she still be in the harbor."\textsuperscript{35} In time Aubert responded. "The whole town was pillaged and set on fire," he wrote, adding that "only 300 houses are standing and they are looted of all their contents." Aubert informed Girard, "My partners are gone; I do not even know where. Our place of business was not burned but robbed of all its contents."\textsuperscript{36} To accommodate the frightened refugees, Captain Congdon opened up the Polly's hold and deck to passengers. In all, thirty-eight passengers, including Aubert and his family, and their few belongings sailed with the ship as it left the smoldering island, in the third week of August 1793. They "have no home and . . . their little baggage, clothing, etc. is packed in barrels, . . ." wrote Congdon before he lifted anchor. Within twenty-four hours, tragedy struck the unfortunate voyagers again.\textsuperscript{37}

At first Stephen Girard heard only rumors. M. Bacon, Aubert's partner, wrote from Le Cap: "I have heard, that the Polly is in possession of two privateers at Caicos." A Baltimore trading house sent him more certain news. "On the 19th of last month (August) [our] schooner left your brig Polly, Captain Congdon, at anchor at the Caicos with a privateer of 10 cannon from [New] Providence. Our respected friend Aubert has been robbed in all probability (as well as the rest of the passengers) and he will be lucky if he is not taken to one of the ports belonging to these brigands."\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 1:192-96; C.L.R. James, \textit{The Black Jacobins} (New York, 1963), 118-27.
\textsuperscript{35} McMaster, \textit{Life and Times of Stephen Girard}, 1:196.
\textsuperscript{36} Girard Papers, Roll 129, 1793 (266), 7/6.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., Roll 129, 1793 (276), 7/14; and ibid., Roll 129, 1793 (311), 7/30.
\textsuperscript{38} McMaster, \textit{Life and Times of Stephen Girard}, 1:207-8.
In the following months the story became more clear. Aubert, escaping with his family, had hidden all of the passengers' valuable possessions in barrels of coffee, to protect them if the ship should be boarded. The privateer *Sally* had happened upon the brigantine, and the captain of the *Sally* and his crew "almost demolished the ship in their search for valuables." They found the hidden cargo. "The value of the passengers' property," wrote Aubert, "amounted to about 100,000 gourdes, (£4550) and this loss deprives me of every resource."39 The formerly confident agent was despondent over his loss. "After 45 years at the Cape, where I accumulated a fortune over 3,000,000 (£140,000), I have been reduced to this! Nothing was left to the passengers but their clothing. They were presenting claims but I fear nothing will be returned."40 Aubert wrote from New Providence in the Bahamas, where he had been deposited. The *Polly* had been taken to Nassau by the British privateer that had captured her. There, after a hearing, Girard learned that "The brig *Polly* has been released because the property was proven to be yours."41 But the valuables were never seen again.

Although this loss must have represented a hardship to Girard, there was a tragedy of more immediate concern occurring in his own city of Philadelphia. The yellow fever epidemic of 1793 had just struck. As hundreds died in Philadelphia, Girard had the recently released *Polly* sent to Baltimore on September 9. During the epidemic, Girard remained in Philadelphia and donated his services to help the afflicted. Trade was closed in the port, and the *Polly*'s crew took a much needed vacation after their ordeal. The ship had been damaged by the crew of the privateer, and its crew remained anxious and concerned about their relatives in Philadelphia. The *Polly* remained idle until October when Girard finally sent word that the city was free of the contagion and thus safe for the *Polly*'s return. The *Polly* limped home, completing its seventeenth voyage in four years, despite a slave insurrection, a privateer attack, and an epidemic.

As the fever diminished, merchants and craftsmen returned to Philadelphia. Congdon immediately set to work repairing the *Polly*,

39 Girard Papers, Roll 129, 1793 (405), 9/5.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., Roll 129, 1793 (410), 9/9.
hiring laborers and himself clocking over twenty days of work aboard the vessel in the following weeks. The bills for the supplies he bought totaled more than £100, a sizable proportion of the Polly's original cost. In two month's time the ship was seaworthy again.

By this time the war between Britain and France was catching trading vessels from the United States in the middle. Particularly damaging was England's order of June 8, 1793, for ships of war to "stop all vessels loaded . . . with corn, flour, or meal bound to any port in France, or any port occupied by the armies of France." Girard was aware of these dangers, but decided that the promise of profits in the French islands was sufficient to meet the risks. Since he no longer had agents in St. Domingue to transact his business, he decided to revert to the "common" way of running a trading ship. Congdon would serve as both captain and agent. Girard's letter to him read: "After your arrival in the port of Point-a-Petre in the Island of Guadaloupe, should you find there a very bad market or any disturbance . . . you may proceed to any other port or island, and [trade her cargo] for the best of my interest." The cargo was also more varied than before, more resembling those of Girard's competitors. He shipped flour, but also pork, anchovies, capers and olives from France, and sweet oil. Such a strategy suggests that Girard considered resident agents superior to captain-agents, but where the former were unavailable, he would revert to the latter.

The cargo was loaded into the renovated ship, and in early December 1793 the Polly left Philadelphia, never to return again. What happened to the ship is disclosed in the court depositions of her captain. Congdon testified in a Bermuda court that he left Philadelphia on the third of December, bound for Point Detze in Guadeloupe, when a storm overcame the vessel and damaged her severely. He was forced to seek refuge at Bassa-terre where he unloaded some of his cargo. Then, unexpectedly, the government of Guadeloupe placed an embargo on all vessels and seized the recently unloaded provisions ex post facto. All protest fell on deaf ears, and Congdon left Bassatterre empty-handed on April 10, 1794, bound again for Philadelphia,

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43 McMaster, Life and Times of Stephen Girard, 1:252.
but on April 19 the *Polly* was “met by a certain Bermuda privateer, called the ‘Enterprize’, and commanded by one Joseph Robinson.” Robinson seized the *Polly*, ordering her to Bermuda as alleged French property.

At first the issue was only the nationality of the owner, but when it became obvious that Girard was American, the British retained the vessel simply because it had traded at a French port. Girard sent a personal messenger to Bermuda to see to his affairs, but by the time the messenger arrived, it was already too late. The agent was equally unsuccessful in his attempts to repurchase the vessel. This, he wrote, unfortunately “puts an end to the Business in our case.”44 The *Polly* was lost.

The ship itself was gone, but Girard worked feverishly to obtain remuneration from Great Britain. After John Jay signed his famous treaty with Britain, Stephen Girard led a movement of merchants protesting the document because it did not allow adequate remedy for losses like the *Polly*.45 Additionally, he sent the United States Agent for American Claims in London a bill for $23,947.94, exclusive of damages and interest, the amount he figured he had lost on the *Polly’s* last voyage. And, finally, he hired the firm of George Barclay & Co., of London, to help settle the *Polly* case. Ultimately, Girard was rewarded for his efforts. On May 12, 1798, over four years after the *Polly’s* condemnation, the London Court of Appeals reversed the decision of the Bermuda court. Girard was granted his full claim of $33,132.87, although it was not fully paid until July 1803.

In short, the *Polly* was, through the end, an extremely profitable investment for its owner. Although the precise amounts that Girard claimed from this single vessel remain unclear, it is certain that the ship paid for itself within two voyages and earned him large profits in most of its trips. It should be added that Girard owned at different times seven additional ships that made trips to the West Indies, and he had shares in many others. During the years 1789-1794 when he was sailing the *Polly*, Girard more than doubled his worth from £20,681 to £55,211. These were the years when he began to build his enormous fortune. After the *Polly’s* loss, Girard gradually reduced

44 Ibid., 1:272.
his interest in overseas trading and expanded his more famous activity, banking. In February 1812 his last ship, the Helvetius, returned to Philadelphia after an unsuccessful voyage to Havana. This was Stephen Girard’s final trading voyage. By this time he could boast a fortune of $2,140,958. He died in 1831 with an estate of over $7,500,000.46

The Polly was a representative ship of the Girard fleet, illustrating consistent business practices. His management of the ship reflects the principles or themes of operation—specialization, information, safety, speed of operations, and flexibility—that recurred throughout her voyages. Stephen Girard reduced external hazards in four ways. First, he succeeded in mitigating market uncertainty by regionalizing his fleet to specific areas like Marseilles, Charleston, and St. Domingue. He was personally familiar with these areas, which allowed him to utilize family ties and develop firm connections with trustworthy agents. He preferred to rely upon hired employees to supply information rather than the possibly “unreliable” reports of self-serving foreign merchants. Second, he used a novel method of selling his cargoes. Rather than pay his captain on commission according to the standard practice, he paid straight wages. His agent, hired for knowledge of local markets, was paid a commission to sell the shipment, precluding his captain from making island-to-island trips in search of markets. In addition, the use of agents allowed him the all-important luxury of the warehouse, into which cargoes could be stored if his ships happened to arrive when prices were low. Third, Girard increasingly specialized his cargoes, reducing them from three staple items in the early voyages to the single staple of flour. This was possible because of the sound Pennsylvania paper money, the solid Philadelphia commercial bank, the increasing organization of his suppliers, and particularly by his accurate knowledge of the market and use of a warehouse. Moreover, Girard was flexible, consigning his cargoes when the risks grew too great, and reverting to the traditional means of ship management when he lost his agents in the West Indies. Fourth and finally, Girard always carried insurance to mitigate the element of chance, and to protect his investment against the ever present threat of hostile privateers.

46 Ibid., 341.
In addition to these methods of reducing market risk, Girard maintained an internally efficient countinghouse that insured maximum profits. His management techniques are demonstrated by the 663 reels of microfilm stored at the American Philosophical Society library in Philadelphia on which are recorded many thousands of Girard's letters and records. He maintained a rapid tempo of business transactions, and his ships were notable for their unequaled transit time. The Polly, for example, completed eight round-trip adventures in the first two years and seventeen in four years. This number is extraordinary compared to colonial counts where the maximum number of recorded voyages for a ship was four in a single year or six in two years.\(^{47}\) With the Polly, Girard managed more than four a year over four years. He took pride in the quick turn-around times and instilled this enthusiasm in his captains. Perhaps it was this pressure that tended to limit his sailors to single voyages as crewmen aboard the Polly. Whether one accepts Thomas Doerflinger's thesis that the techniques that Girard used were typical of his contemporaries\(^{48}\) or whether they were innovations,\(^{49}\) the single-minded drive of Stephen Girard, as exemplified in the management of the Polly, surely was an important factor in the banker's later successes. As such, Stephen Girard is a landmark in the history of American businessmen, and through the voyages of the Polly we see how individuals like Girard, each in their own manner, contributed to the vigorous economic expansion that took place in the United States in the 1780s and 1790s.

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