

***Matamoros Was “a Wretched Place”:
Letters from a Shipmaster, 1864-1865***

David Montejano

Once New Orleans and Galveston were blockaded by the Union navy in late 1861, the trade routes of the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy were altered accordingly. A new commercial circuit emerged, leading several hundred miles westward from the plantations of Louisiana and East Texas to the wharves of Matamoros and from this transshipment point to the textile factories of England and New England. The formal neutrality of Matamoros, and of the British merchant marine that conveyed the cargo, allowed the warring South to continue trading in a thinly disguised commerce. Matamoros was the “life line of the Confederacy,” its only stable link to Liverpool and New York. At the height of this trade, up to 200 hundred ships—some estimates say 300-- were anchored off the mouth of the Rio Grande on the Mexican side. [1]

Despite this intense maritime activity, there is a paucity of seafaring material that pertains to the Matamoros trade. Herein lies the significance of a cache of letters written by shipmaster Daniel C. Childs to his New York investors, A. Forbes Freeman and William F. Almy, in 1864 and early 1865. [2] The letters provide a rare window into the thinking of northern merchant mariners engaged in this wartime trade. They reveal the nonchalant attitude of the shipmaster, and by implication that of the New York investors as well, towards the Civil War at this point. When mentioning his deals with the “men of war” in Matamoros, Childs wrote in a matter of fact tone; there was no sense of “illegality” or contradiction. What the letters best reveal were the two main concerns of most 19th century shipmasters, that of unpredictable weather and unpredictable workers. [3]

For several months in early 1864, an idled shipmaster, Daniel C. Childs from Baltimore, had been proposing a partnership to his stock brokers, Mssrs. Freeman & Almy of New York [55 Front St.], that the three purchase a good vessel for the Matamoros or West India trade --“about the most profitable and best thing that

could be entered in to during this unfortunate struggle.” Childs was “heartily sick of doing nothing –to sail under the British flag would be far preferable to me at the present time than any other.” Childs believed “ere long the neutral flag will have all the conveying trade. There will be too much Risk in Federal bottoms.” [4]

Neither Childs nor his stockbroker partners raised the question of trading with the Confederacy as an issue in their exchange of letters. By early 1864, when a Union victory appeared to be a matter of time, the Matamoros trade was no longer a controversial matter for many northern merchants. Maritime trade between Matamoros and New Orleans had been reopened, and Brownsville, across from Matamoros, was in the hands of Union soldiers. [Union forces captured Brownsville in November 1863 but withdrew in July 1864.] Thus, Child’s letters displayed a relaxed attitude towards the War. Indeed, the partners had a betting wager on when it would be over. When Freeman & Almy wrote Childs in early May (1864) that the market was dull with “no chance of a change until Lee is Licked,” Childs responded (on May 18th)—“if so you must waite for some time to come before you can have any change for the better.” Referring to “Grants immense Victory” at the Battle of Spotsylvania, Childs thought that “Grant got the worst of it and rather think he will get more than he bargained for before he is done with Lee –tell Frank I shall soon be ready for my New Hats. “ Childs was wagering that “G. will not be in R. by July 7th.” [5] Childs would win that wager.

Childs’ stockbrokers, A. Forbes Freeman and Wm. F. Almy, were young men of 26 and 30 years, who with the backing of Almy’s father had started a brokerage business in April 1863. The R. G. Dunn credit agency described them (Sept 1864) as “young men doing a successful business have not large means but are reliable and in good cr for thr bus engagements.” [6] Their partnership with Childs was one of their first ventures. The familiarity expressed in the letters suggests that Childs was an old friend of the Almys.

The partners bought the Brig GERTRUDE in June or July of 1864. In the Fall of 1864, Childs took the GERTRUDE on an inaugural voyage to Port of Spain, Trinidad, and St. Thomas, during which he registered the vessel under the British

flag. Then he headed back to New York and Boston. In December 1864, he loaded a cargo of preserved meats, canned vegetables, canned milk, potatoes, and assorted dry goods to sell in Matamoros. The “5 galls whiskey bought of Lester Clark & Co., NY,” on the other hand, was clearly for ship consumption. [7]

Childs left New York on January 10th, 1865. A heavy gale from WSW drove them off to Bermuda, then they faced “some four days Calm of Hole in the Wall.” They arrived off Bagdad (the actual port of Matamoros) on February 10th, a week later than the expected three-week trip. Childs’ initial impressions of the port were not promising:

The market appears to be
gluted with almost evy
thing. I find it a wretched
place, as well as very unsafe
for a vessel. There has
been several lost lately
and any number of chains
& anchors lost. . . . [8]

After having been ashore two days, Childs composed a lengthy letter reaffirming his observation that the market was “flat & dull” and “gluted with most every thing.” He was “astonished at the quantity of Preserved meats etc. that are here.” It was also an expensive place:

—evry thing five dollars—water
eight cents per gallon and not fit to Drink—
a vessel comeing here should be well paid
to make it even a fair business –

Childs felt “satisfied evry thing will fall short of our calculations” but he would “endeavour to sell what I can to the men of war –and the balance do the best I can with them.” [9]

Regarding cotton, Childs held “not the least hope of doing any thing Vessels are leaving here evy day in ballast for New York & Havana & several arrived here

yesterday from New York in ballast.” There was “an immense fleet here at least 150 vessels and most of them wanting business.” The problem, explained Childs, was that all the cotton was already contracted for shipment. But “the Roads are so bad that it arrives very slowly. I do not think we could get a cargo by laying here two months.” [10]

Childs repeated his concerns about the dangers of being in a crowded anchorage with unpredictable weather. This was “one of the last places in the world” that a vessel should visit “as the Risk is so much greater”

—you do not know at what moment
your vessel may part her chains and go adrift
or have another vessel drift foul of you
it keeps you in a constant state of anxiety---
some vessels have been here two & three months
and had to go to sea several times –others
have been more fortunate—some total Loss

A violent storm would create havoc. Childs noted that “as yet we have not experienced one but look dayly for one.” He closed by saying that he would “be glad when we get away from here—.” [11]

Childs had hopes of getting out in some eight or ten days. Four days after arriving, the lighters started discharging the GERTRUDE’s load, and Childs went ashore to tend to the sale of the ship’s cargo --potatoes, turnips, green corn & other vegetables, fruits, canned milk, canned meats, candles, butter, and pistols –“the five with the cartages.” [12] Aside the potatoes and pistols, Childs faced some difficulty selling his cargo. The “men of war” opened several boxes of vegetables “and found some three cans badly spoilt and would not take them.” Childs figured he would “try to get them off as soon as possible and I hope at more than a saveing Rate—.” [13]

Ten days after arriving (Feb 20th), Childs reported that they were about half discharged and that he wanted to settle things as soon as possible: “That is if we do not go adrift and get on the beach before we can get away from this miserable hole.” [14] But heavy seas and a thick fog delayed the discharging for several days. The fog

was so bad that a worried Childs “was off Looking for the Brig a whole day & could not find her it being intensely thick & am still detained on Shore.” Everyone was predicting a storm. [15] However, the following week the weather cleared sufficiently to allow the unloading to resume. 205 vessels were off the bar.

Two weeks later (March 9th), nearly a month after the GERTRUDE’s arrival, its cargo had been placed on shore and sold or disposed of. Then the much feared “Norther” struck. Childs had just finished taking care of business ashore, as he explained to his investor partners--“I was just congratulating myself on getting clear of this wretched place without any accident”—and was on a launch on the way back to the GERTRUDE “when a Norther came on so suddenly that we were glad to beach the boat and save our lives.” The torrential storm blew most of the mercantile fleet from their anchorage. “Out of a fleet of 141 vessels,” Childs estimated that

there remains but 53 in the Roads
and the most of them draged a long distance—I
am sorry to say the GERTRUDE is amongst the
missing ones. [16]

Childs feared that “some Vessel must have drifted foul of us and had to Slip.” He expected that some 80 vessels would return in a day or two, and that the GERTRUDE would be among them: “the mate I have on board is a good carefull man and I have no doubt but he will get back here in a day or two.” But at the bottom of the letter, a postscript written in different color ink was added:

Brig returned but torn to pieces and lost her anchor
and gibboom and Bowsprit and sails the Capt
had not time to write going to Havanna [17]

In his subsequent letter, sent from Havana two weeks later, Childs explained that he had been so disgusted with the GERTRUDE’s condition that he decided to leave at once for Havana “although a scant allowance of water on board.” Childs added that he knew that nothing could be done in Bagdad by way of repairs and he feared another “Norther.” [18]

Capt. Childs described the damage done to the ship in detail. The GERTRUDE, with its heavy anchor and chain, “would have rode it [the gale] out without the least trouble if others had kept clear of us.” But after the gale had been blowing some six hours, “a Brigantine name unknown & Schooner Sybil drifted down across our bows carrying away Jib Boom with all attached which was cut adrift Forthwith.” The damage would have been greater had the GERTRUDE not slipped its cable, but unfortunately the GERTRUDE was now entangled with the Brigantine “& not manageable in weaving quick & drifted through house of Brig name unknown astern of us.” In the resulting collision, the GERTRUDE lost its Topmast and its sails [Top Gallant Back stays, main & monkey sails], in addition to the Jib Boom and anchor and chain. Captain Childs placed the blame squarely on the SYBIL:

If I had been on board I think I should have
given the Sybil a good rakeing before Sliping
as she was the source of all the trouble & the
least sufferer—her walking off with her anchor
& fouling three vessels which were much damaged
& she in fact receiving but little damage. She
should have sliped her cable the moment he started
his anchor which would have saved us however
it is too late to say what might have been done. . . [19]

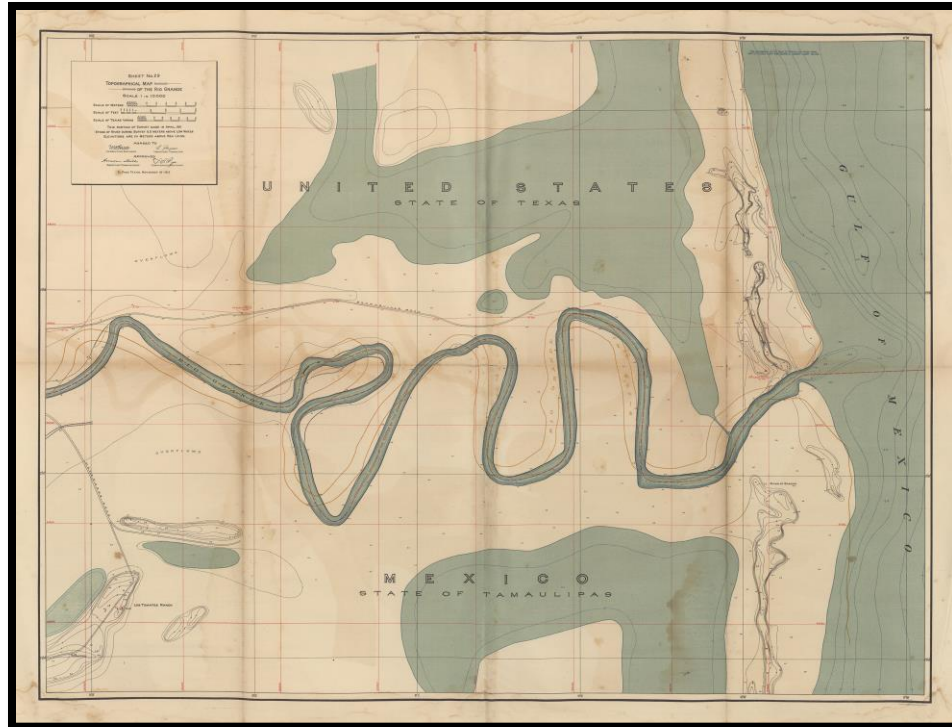


Figure 1 1912 Topographical Map of the Rio Grande as it enters the Gulf of Mexico at the port of Bagdad near Matamoros. Perry-Castaneda Library Map Collection, University of Texas.

The March storm damage and vessel repair occupied Childs' correspondence through early April. The Foremast, ropes, cable and anchor were among the items that had to be replaced, and one entire side of the ship had to be caulked. Childs was concerned about keeping expenses low. He noted with some pride that he had saved money by dispensing "with Regers doing the work with my crew which I would have to pay \$4.00 per day for" while employing "Negroes to take in cargo which would have been done with my own crew." [20] The GERTRUDE would spend two weeks in Havana undergoing repairs before departing for New Orleans.

Aside from a constant fear of storms, a recurring theme in Childs' letters to his investors was that of keeping expenses low, crew wages included. The normal crew complement consisted of three mates, a seaman, and a cook. Besides the regular crew, Childs had "2 Boys & Cabin Boy" on board—race identity unknown, but likely African American. The wages due mate and seaman on board the GERTRUDE's inaugural voyage (Sept.-Nov, 1864) to St. Thomas had been \$50 a month, minus any advances. On the GERTRUDE's return to Baltimore, the three

mates were discharged while the seaman died at a Baltimore hospital. For the voyage of two months and two days, all earned \$133 and, after deductions for advances, all were paid about \$80. The only exception was the dead seaman whose \$50 hospital fees were deducted from his wages. [21]

For the voyage to Matamoros, Childs had recruited replacements in Baltimore. The GERTRUDE departed on January 10th and by the time it reached Bagdad a month later, Childs had come to see his first mate as “a poor miserable scoundrell” and “worthless.” He was “turned ashore” the same day the GERTRUDE arrived. On the other hand, he was impressed with Dick—“my wright hand man—he will make a smart fellows.” [22]

Childs’ correspondence for February and March, when he was preoccupied with selling the GERTRUDE’s cargo and then with repairing the storm-damaged ship, hardly mentioned the crew. But with the expenses of repair behind him, Childs’ April correspondence turned to crew matters. While stopped at South West Pass, off the mouth of the Mississippi, Childs wrote his investors that he planned to lay off the crew once they arrived in New Orleans: “Seamans wages will however be much less from here than we are now paying—\$50—and as soon as we get up will pay Evry one off but Boys.” [23] Childs had a low opinion (to put it mildly) of his hired crew, except for Dick. In a follow up letter several days later, while still “laying here” off the Pass waiting for tugboats, Childs expressed his frustration with the crew:

I am anxious to get up & get rid of
the worthless set we have on Board
with such high wages—“ [24]

But on arriving in New Orleans and attempting to settle accounts with the crew, Childs found himself “in trouble with the U.S. Commissioner in regard to Sailors wages.” Childs wanted to pay them “in Gold at Rate of Exchange \$2.23” but such payments were called unlawful---“after all the trouble had to pay them all currency and cost of Court as well.” Apparently the crew had filed a complaint. [25]

One does not have to read too deeply between the lines to sense that the crew reciprocated Childs' disdain of them with their own. The court costs were not just for his attempt to pay the crew in gold. There was

also drummed
up a case of Assault & Battery which
was an additional charge of \$68.00 for
slapping an impertinent & mutinous fellow
in the face—rather an unpleasant and
Expensive Luxury—

Childs explained that the U.S. Commissioner was “a petty Lawyer from Marine Court of N York—who is altogether on the make without regard to wright or justice.” So in New Orleans Childs dismissed the crew with the exception of the cook, the boys and Dick—“Dick I want to make Mate. but he lacks confidence.” [26]

Childs apparently fit the mold—one much elaborated in the maritime literature of the time—of the heavy handed, authoritarian shipmaster. He had dismissed his first mate on arriving in Matamoros, slapped another crewmember once at sea, and then “turned ashore” the entire crew in New Orleans, with a few exceptions. Childs' constant complaints about expenses also remind one that he was a merchant. Matamoros was expensive; Havana was expensive. New Orleans was no exception. In recruiting a replacement crew, Childs was surprised, contrary to his expectations, that wages were so high:

“Expenses are awfull here in Shipping crew very
little less than when in New York. I
thought first of going without mates
as they prove so worthless. but feared
it would affect insurance—have to
pay –mate \$60—2 mate \$40 Seaman \$30
Cook \$45—“

Captain Childs had retained the “2 Boys & Cabin Boy” and “advanced them a mere Trifle.” [27]

Making matters worse was Childs' failure to get freights to Matamoros or Havana. "Our Expenditures have far Exceeded our incomings," as Childs put it. On May 12th he left New Orleans in ballast for Matanzas, Cuba, in hope of securing some trade. But the "dull business" there finally convinced Childs and his investor partners to terminate the adventure and sell the GERTRUDE in Europe. [28] In the last letter to his partners, written from London on August 25th, Childs noted he had received two offers, one for L900 and the other for L1100, both far below the L2000 they had hoped for. Apparently Childs did not proceed with the sale. Lloyd's Register of American and Foreign Shipping lists Master D. Childs as captain of the GERTRUDE through 1875. Freeman and Almy were listed as owners until 1870, when Almy left the partnership. [29]

* * * * *

In closing, what does this cache of letters tell us? They provide a rare glimpse of the "Confederate life line" in the last months of the Civil War, and they reveal the business mindset of northern merchants engaged in this wartime trade. But it is Childs' experience as a shipmaster dealing with stormy weather and unruly crew that make these letters a fascinating testament about the world of the 19th century merchant marine.

ENDNOTES

1. See Stephen R. Wise, Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running during the Civil War (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); also Frank Lawrence Owsley, King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1959 2nd rev. ed.)
2. GERTRUDE (Brig). Correspondence, accounts, bills, & receipts, Feb 11, 1864-Aug. 25, 1865, VFM 1534, Mystic Seaport Ms. Collection. G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic CT.
3. See, for example, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Two Years Before the Mast: A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea (New York: Harper, 1840); Frederic Stanhope, Twenty years at Sea; or, Leaves from my old log-books (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1893); S. Samuels, From the Forecastle to the Cabin (New York: Harper, c.1887).

4. Letters to Mssrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from D. C. Childs, Baltimore, Feb 11, 1864; March 27, 1864; April 5, 1864.
5. Letters to Mssrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Daniel Childs, Baltimore, May 18th; May 19th, 1864. In a single day in the Battle of Spotsylvania (May 12th), the number of Federal and Confederate casualties numbered 6,800 and an estimated 5,000, respectively.
6. R. G. Dun Collection, Vol. 348, p. 889, Baker Library, Harvard University
7. Invoice of cargo placed on Brig GERTRUDE in NY, Dec 13/64, bought from Zerega & Bennes. According to American Lloyd's Register of American and Foreign Shipping, the GERTRUDE was built in 1858 in Liverpool at the Alimuri shipyards and placed on the Register in December 1864 in New York.
8. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, Feb 11th 1865
9. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Matamoras, Feb 14th 1865. Childs' letter was being delivered by a New York-bound vessel leaving in ballast.
10. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Matamoras, Feb 14th 1865.
11. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Matamoras, Feb 14th 1865.
12. Ltrs to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Matamoras, Feb 14th 1865; from Childs, Bagdad, Feb 17th 1865
13. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, Feb 17th 1865
14. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, Feb 20 1865
15. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, Feb 21 1865
16. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, March 10th 1865
17. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, March 10th 1865
18. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Havanna, March 24th 1865
19. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Havanna, March 24th 1865
20. Ltr to Messrs. Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Havanna, April 1st
21. Account of Wages Due Mate & Seaman on Board.
22. Ltrs to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, Bagdad, Feb 11th 1865; Feb 20th 1865
23. Ltr to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, South West Pass, April 14th 1865
24. Ltr to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, South West Pass, April 19th 1865
25. Ltr to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, New Orleans, April 29th 1865. U.S. Treasury regulations required all transactions in the rebellious states to be conducted in "greenbacks" or U.S. notes rather than gold.

26. Ltr to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, New Orleans, April 29th 1865
27. Ltr to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, New Orleans, May 12th 1865
28. Ltrs to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, New Orleans, April 29th 1865; Matanzas, June 9th 1865
29. Ltr to Freeman & Almy, New York, from Childs, London, Aug 25th 1865;
American Lloyd's Register of American and Foreign Shipping (xxxxx). The R. G. Dunn Credit Agency reported that A. Forbes Freeman and Wm. F. Almy, 55 Front St.: "Feb 2/66, dissolved by mutual consent." R. G. Dun Collection, Vol. 348, p. 889, Baker Library, Harvard University.