



## The failure of a transatlantic alliance? Franco-American trade, 1783–1815

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the evolution of shipping and trade between the United States and France from the end of the American War of Independence to the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1783–1815). It argues that commercial relations followed their own, internal dynamic and had scarce connections to statist commercial policies. These relations were, however, deeply responsive to the international context and to warfare in particular. American shipping to France experienced an extraordinary boom after the outbreak of war between France and Great Britain in 1793. The paper explores the nature of this trade and demonstrates that its full understanding requires a global approach to trade flows in the Atlantic World rather than the bilateral approaches which dominate contemporary as well as most historical analyses. A broader analysis must integrate merchant strategies and networks into the Atlantic history. The last part of the paper analyses the specific case of Bordeaux, the major French port for US shipping during the French Wars.

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Statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic believed that the Franco-American alliance during the Independence War would open a new age of amity and cooperation between the United States and France. These expectations were rapidly dashed. Speeches and reports circulating in governmental circles in the 1780s clearly show increasing deception and bitterness on both sides of the Atlantic, and mutual incomprehension became even more acrimonious as years passed.<sup>1</sup> Despite Jefferson's and Vergennes' efforts to increase Franco-American trade in the second half of the 1780s, the adoption of the Tonnage Act and the incapacity of negotiating a new, more satisfactory trade treaty point to the failure of Franco-American commercial policy at the end of the 1780s, well before revolutionary upheavals and increasing tensions would bring the two countries to a quasi-war.

If, politically, the Franco-American "Atlantic alliance" was coming apart well before the French Revolution, things are quite different if we look at them from the perspective of economic actors. After a difficult time in the middle of the 1780s, commercial links between the two countries were getting already stronger, when the outbreak of European maritime war in 1793 gave American shipping and trade a decisive advantage for growth. Political and economic relations did not follow a similar chronology, because they obeyed two different logics. Whereas scholars have essentially dealt with bilateral international relations between France and the United States, this paper suggests that trade connections and shipping between two given countries can be better understood by looking both at the overall situation of world maritime trade and at the actors' perception of business opportunities.

This paper is concerned with the ways French and American ship-owners and merchants took advantage of and built opportunities within an evolving Atlantic world. It deals more specifically with trade and shipping between French and US ports from the end of the 1780s to the end of Napoleon's empire in 1815. It analyses how the actors reacted to changes in the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter P. Hill, 'La suite imprévue de l'alliance: l'ingratitude américaine, 1783–1789', in *La Révolution américaine et l'Europe*, ed. Claude Fohlen, Jacques Godechot (Ed. du CNRS, Paris, 1979), 385–8.

international context by looking at the kind of business they organised. I will first present trade between the two countries in the 1780s and then analyse the radical changes it underwent once warfare lasting more than 20 years opposed France to Great Britain on the seas. The case of shipping between Bordeaux and the ports of the East coast of the United States will show how this general picture concretely affected trade.

## French and American trade and shipping from the end of the War of Independence to the beginning of the French Wars

Although Americans were still fighting against their former mother-country for their independence, trade between the United States and Great Britain at the beginning of the 1780s was already more valuable than trade to France, despite the fact that France was America's most important ally after 1778.<sup>2</sup> The French project of ousting British trade from their former colonies had failed. Trade, however, continued between the American Confederation and France after 1783. On the one hand, after France partially opened its West Indian colonies to foreign shipping in 1784, Americans were very active in Antilles trade, well beyond the limits that the Crown in Versailles had expected. On the other hand, regular trade between France and the United States emerged once the economic stagnation and trade speculation of the 1780s had ceased. In relationship to the high expectations of political circles, these achievements were unsatisfactory. However, they provided a sound basis for the considerable expansion of trade which took place after 1793.

### *The United States and the trade to the French West Indies*

Americans had not waited until they became independent in order to trade to the French West Indies. In 1770, for instance, trade from Boston to non-British West Indies was already twelve times more valuable than was trade to the British West Indies, which was at that time legal.<sup>3</sup> During, and even more so after the War of Independence, commercial exchanges between the United States and the French colonies underwent a considerable growth, to the great displeasure of French merchants who had enjoyed a monopoly up to that time. The exclusion of US-ships from the British West Indies and the French law of August 30, 1784, opening French colonies to a limited trade with foreign nationals, only reinforced this tendency.

Throughout the 1780s, US shipping to French West Indies was consistently more important than that flowing from the US to metropolitan France. American exports to the French West Indies in 1789–1790, for instance, were twice those to France.<sup>4</sup> This trade nurtured an intense shipping activity. In 1786, Boston fitted out eight ships to France (1160 tons) compared to 104 to the French West Indies (7762 tons).<sup>5</sup> It was in Saint-Domingue, rather than in France, that Americans acquired French manufactured goods or French wines and brandies. In a letter sent to a Bordeaux merchant house in 1789, Dutilh and Wachsmuth of Philadelphia advised them for instance not to ship anything to the United States, and added: 'It is specially useless to send wine, consumption is very scarce, and Saint-Domingue provides us the little we need at a very moderate price, generally at a better price than it would cost in Bordeaux itself'.<sup>6</sup>

When war between France and Great Britain erupted in 1793, compelling France to open its West Indian colonies to neutral shipping, American shipmasters and merchants had already established regular business contacts in these colonies. They knew local merchants well, who could easily provide them with whole cargoes of colonial goods. This allowed them to become a privileged intermediary in the trade between French colonies and their mother-country. Given the strong links between Bordeaux and the West Indies in the eighteenth century, this also explains why such a great part of American shipping to France after 1793 was directed toward Bordeaux.

### *Shipping and trade between France and the United States at the end of the 1780*

Parallel to the increase of United States trade to the French West Indies in the second half of the 1780s, a steady trade merged also between the United States and France. Shipping to France was stimulated by important tobacco orders from the *Ferme Générale*,<sup>7</sup> as well as by grain shortages at the end of the 1780s. As a result, the number of American ships sailing to France increased threefold between the midst of the 1780s and the 3-year mean 1787–1789.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Godechot, 'Les relations économiques entre la France et les États-Unis de 1778 à 1789', *French Historical Studies* 1 (1958), 27–39, here 30–1.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Frostin, 'Saint-Domingue et la révolution Américaine', *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe* 22 (1974), 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Stover, 'French-American Trade during the Confederation, 1781–1789', *North Carolina Historical Review* 35 (1958), 399–414, here 413.

<sup>5</sup> Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter: AN), AE, B III 444.

<sup>6</sup> Library of Congress, Washington, Dutilh & Wachsmuth, Philadelphia, MMC–2976, letterbook 1788–9, 317. Letter of Dutilh & Wachsmuth, Philadelphia 3 May 1789, to Jauge & Dupuy of Bordeaux, 'Il ne convient surtout pas d'envoyer de vos vins, la consommation est très peu conséquente & St. Domingue nous fournit à un prix très modéré le peu dont nous avons besoin et généralement à bien meilleur marché qu'il ne coûte à Bord[eau]x même'.

<sup>7</sup> For a very detailed analysis of the tobacco monopoly in France, see Jacob Myron Price, *France and the Chesapeake. A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly 1674–1791 and of its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades*, 2 vols (Ann Arbor, 1973).

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