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The Firm of Levi & Tocque

The firm of Levi & Toque (or Tocque & Levi) was formed as a partnership at the end of the American Revolution, when hostilities had ceased and American privateers no longer made the work of commercial fishermen hazardous on the Grand Banks off the coasts of Newfoundland. The firm was organized as a commercial fishing operation to exploit the wealth of fish in the area. It was not an early comer to the area. Europeans had fished there since the 15th Century when Portugese fishermen made yearly voyages to the Grand Banks and sometimes "wintered over" on the Newfoundland shores.

Earlier in the 18th Century, certain entrepreneurs in England had secured a Parliamentary grant to exclusive fishing rights in Newfoundland. The authority of these "fishing admirals" extended even to civil matters, there being no organized civil government on the Newfoundland shores. It was not until about 1820 that a royal governor was appointed for Newfoundland and that courts were established and the fishing admirals shorn of their former power. These basic structures of civil government were delayed in Newfoundland by the American Revolution, during which time the British navy was the ruling power in Atlantic Canada.

As a commercial fishing operation, Levi & Tocque brought together two major elements: the marketing enterprises of the Tocque family and the expertise of the Levi family in the outfitting and maintenance of sailing ships.

The Tocque family were residents of St. Helier, the capital of the Island of Jersey. From that base the family had developed markets for fish throughout northern Europe. The proposed harvesting of Atlantic fish from the Grand Banks thus had a large group of markets already in place. The Levi's were a family of ship chandlers located in Newton Bushel in Devonshire, on the estuary of the River Teign. The family had emigrated there from Cadiz at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. They had been forcibly converted to the Church of England in the late 1600's.

The firm seems to have begun operations in Newfoundland in the mid-1880's. The first two partners were Simon Levi and Philip Tocque. Both men had sons who bore the same names, so it is necessary in discussing the firm to designate the four men as Simon Levi, *the elder*, Philip Tocque, *the elder*, Simon Levi, *the younger*, and Philip Tocque, *the younger*. Simon Levi, *the elder* was the older of the original partners; Philip Tocque, *the elder* was somewhat younger.

It was the practice of Grand Banks fishermen to go home in the wintertime. As far back as the Portugese this had been the pattern. The English "fishing admirals" did the same. They would arrive in Newfoundland in the spring and return to England in early winter. Even the governor, later appointed by the Crown, continued this practice and it was only with difficulty that the people of Newfoundland finally persuaded Parliament to insist that the governor remain in the country during the winter.

It appears that Simon Levi, *the elder* never settled in Newfoundland, but sailed home for Devonshire every year after the fishing season was over. We have no indication as to whether Philip Tocque, *the elder* remained in Newfoundland during the winter months or returned to St. Helier. It is probable, however, that as junior partner it fell to him to stay in Carbonear throughout the year to look after the firm's interests there. (We must also remember that the Island of Jersey was threatened by France during the Napoleonic era and it was safer for Philip to stay in America at the time.)

Simon Levi, *the elder* had a son, born 3 January 1793, whom he named Simon. In 1814, when Simon, *the younger* was 21 years old (and the war with republican France had ended) his father apparently sent him out to Newfoundland to work in the business. At this point, Philip Tocque, *the elder* became the senior partner of the firm, at least as far as the day-to-day operations in Newfoundland were concerned.

Philip Tocque, *the elder* also had a son, born in 1814, whom he named Philip. It was expected that Philip Tocque, *the younger* would in time become a member of the commercial fishing firm which his father and his father's partner, Simon Levi, *the younger*, were busy operating. But that was not to be.

Philip Tocque, *the younger* grew up with a distaste for the business. He spent a few years in the mid-1830's working for the firm. For a time he operated a clock and watch shop in Carbonear. But he found his real vocation as a teacher and writer and later as an ordained Anglican priest.

In 1835, when his son was just 21 years old, Philip Tocque, *the elder* died. Simon Levi, *the younger* was left at age 42 with no senior partner and with a junior partner who was not interested in the business. Within two years Simon was in bankruptcy. His support from the Tocque family had disappeared and the firm essentially began to fall into a decline.

The following information concerning the partnership of Levi & Tocque was retrieved from the records of the Maritime History Archives of Newfoundland. The search was made at the Archives under the name *Simon Levi*. The entries below are arranged by date and show, in very rough outline, something of the history of the firm.

Simon Levi, *the elder*

born

died

1788 Simon Levi, Newfoundland, paid 28 shillings 11 pence for clothing for John Martin, seaman. 30 October 1788.

1789 Simon Levi, Newfoundland, paid 13 shillings 6 pence cash in April on the account of John Ellis, seaman of the firm Slade, Ltd. of Fogo, Newfoundland. 30 Oct 1789.

Simon Levi, *the younger* born 3 Jan 1793 died 26 Nov 1877

- 1823 Simon Levi issued a writ against Jona Moores of Freshwater [Newfoundland] for 39 shillings 4 pence. 30 Jan 1823
- 1823 Simon Levi is agent to the estate of Thomas and Frederick Gould, deceased. 3 Feb 1823.
- 1825 Firm of Tocque and Levi sued Richard Carter for 15 pounds 18 shillings 1 pence debt. 31 Oct 1825.
- 1827 Simon Levi appointed a member of the grand jury. 10 May 1827
- 1827 Simon Levi and Philip Tocque sued for 5 pounds 19 shillings 6 pence for overcharges on cloth, clothing and shoes sold to John Goss. To pay 3 pounds 14 shillings. 8 Nov 1827.
- 1828 Simon Levi owner, in partnership with Philip Tocque, of the schooner *Alpha*, built at New Perlican [Newfoundland] by James Thomas, registered [the vessel] 5 Apr 1828: 105 tons, Capt. William Penny.
- 1828 Simon Levi, son-in-law to Philip Tocque's present wife. [Ann (Penny) Tocque] is witness in the case of Tocque v. Howell.
- 1829 Simon Levi owner, in partnership with Philip Tocque, of the brigantine *Elizabeth*, 108 tons, built in Barrington, Nova Scotia in 1817, Capt. Richard Ash, registered [the vessel] 26/1829, on 29 Sep 1829; they bought the vessel 1 May 1829.
- 1831 Simon Levi re-registered the brigantine *Elizabeth* jointly with Ann [Penny] Tocque. 13 May 1831.
- 1832 Simon Levi on the PACK (Carbonear Merchant) Committee in election in Carbonear. Nov 1832
- 1833 Simon Levi, sole owner of the brig[antine] *Jane*, Capt. William Penny, built in New Perlican [Newfoundland] by George Pitman, 151 tons, registered [the vessel] 99/1833.
- 1833 Simon Levi and Co. sued by Henry Howell for 10 pounds 14 shillings 1 pence. March 1833.
- 1833 Writ issued against Simon Levi for 6 pounds 45 shillings by Dan McIver Nov 1833.
- 1833 Tocque and Levi sued John Kennedy for 38 pounds 1 shilling 5 pence. Nov 1833.

- 1834 Simon Levi registered *de novo* the brigantine Jane, Capt. William Penny. 15 Jul 1834.
- 1834 Simon Levbi and Co. sued William [] of John Penny & Co, for 93 pounds 9 shillings 5 pence. nov 1834.
- 1834 Simon Levi sued Alf and Sam Parsons for 3 pounds 5 shillings; and Henry Parsons for 2 pounds 14 shillings. nov 1834.
- 1834 Tocque and Levi sued Martin Berrygan for 9 pounds 18 shillings. Nov 1834.
- 1835 Simon Levi's partner, Philip Tocque, *the elder*, died and Simon and [Tocque's widow] Ann (Penny) Tocque, executors, mortgaged the schooner *Alpha* to Robinson & Brookings as security for debt. 7 Jan 1835.
- 1835 Simon Levi issued writ against James Neal for 12 pounds 11 shillings. April 1835
- 1835 Mortgage on the schooner *Alpha* cancelled. 26 Dec 1835.
- 1835 Another mortgage on the schooner *Alpha* taken up by Simon Levi and Ann (Penny) Tocque. 29 Dec 1835.
- 1837 Simon Levi became insolvent and sold the brigantine *Elizabeth* to John Rorke of Adams Cove, Carbonear, merchant, 14 Dec 1837.
- 1843 The schooner *Alpha* lost at sea.
- 1846 Simon Levi sailed from St. John's to Liverpool. 17 Oct 1846.
- 1847 Simon Levi appointed Inspector of Pickled Fish at Carbonear.
- 1850 Simon Levi, of Carbonear, elected Secretary of the Carbonear Wesleyan Total Abstinence Society. Simon Levi appointed to the grand jury for the Northern Circuit. May 1850
- 1851-1852? Simon Levi emigrates to Boston, Massachusetts with family, except Sarah Ann
- 1853 Simon Levi's oldest daughter, Sarah Ann Levi is married to George Rorke, son of John Rork of Adams Cove, in Carbonear. 14 nov 1853. Simon, his wife Jane (Penny) Levi, and all Sarah's brothers and sisters attend the wedding
- 1878 Simon Levi died at Boston 26 Nov 1877, aged 85. 1 Jan 1878.

Note #1

On March 3, 1822, Simon Levi, *the younger* married Jane Penny, the daughter of Robert and Ann Penny of Carbonear. They were members of the Church of St. James (Anglican) and Simon and Jane were married in that church. Robert Penny died a few years after his daughter's marriage and Ann Penny remarried. She married Philip Tocque, *the elder*, who had been widowed a few years before. Simon Levi's mothre-in-law thus became the wife of his senior partner.

On December 19, 1836, shortly after his father died, Philip Tocque, *the younger* married Eliza Chancey, the eldest daughter of John Chancey of Carbonear.

Note #2

Levi & Tocque owned three, perhaps four ships, the schooner *Alpha* and two or three brig[antine]s: the *Elizabeth* (two registries) and the *Jane*. In the commercial fishing operations, the schooner, with its complement of dories and its crew of fishermen, went out to the Banks perhaps once a week. The actual procedures for catching the Atlantic cod are well represented in the 1930's motion picture *Captians Corageous*, with Spencer Tracy as the Portugese doryman and Lionel Barrymore as the schooner's captain.

When its hold was full, the schooner returned to Carbonear where the fish were dried, salted or pickled and then packed into barrels for shipment to the European markets. The brigs carried the packed fish across the North Atlantic, probably making several trips each season.

One can see that the loss of one of the brigs was not critical to the operations of the business. Other ships could be hired for the journey to England. But the loss of the schooner was a death blow to the firm. In 1843, this calamity happened. Levi & Tocque was essentially out of business, forced to continue only as a transportation firm, carrying other merchants fish to market. Simon Levi, *the younger's* trip back to England in 1846 was probably undertaken to try to raise capital, among his brothers or uncles, for the purchase of another schooner. That no such purchase is on record seems to indicate that his mission failed.

Note #3

The economy of 18th Century Newfoundland was a *mercantile* economy. Unlike the English colonies further south, which quickly developed a strong, *self-sufficient* agricultural and industrial base, Newfoundland remained a land where exploitation of the natural resources by European entrepreneurs was the principal activity. Even settlement of the land was discouraged, when it interfered with the commercial operations.

The political rights of the citizens of Newfoundland were directly affected by its mercantile economy. It took a long time for the civil structures of local government to be established and the power to be taken away from the original entrepreneurs. A similar situation has obtained now in South America for several centuries, the entrepreneurial class continuing to wield political power.

Fortunately, Newfoundland passed in time into a system of representative government. But its mercantile past lends a special meaning to the title *merchant*. In the time of Levi & Tocque a merchant was a member of the entrepreneurial class, not a small time shop-keeper, as the term seems to imply in the United States.

A mercantile economy is essentially a fragile economy. It is subject to the variations of the markets it serves. Those ups and downs can be seen in the fortunes of the firm of Levi & Tocque. Simon Levi, *the younger* tried to hang on in Newfoundland from the death of his senior partner in 1835 until about 1850. But the world economic situation in the late 1840's was basically at the root of the demise of the business.