

**American shipping and trade in warfare, or the benefits of
European conflicts for neutral merchants:
The experience of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars,
1793-1815**

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Abstract

This paper analyses the increase in United States maritime trade during the French wars (1793-1815). It shows how the independence from Great Britain changed the range of opportunities open to North American merchants but implied also new challenges and problems, which the United States government tried to meet. The paper argues that the main factor explaining the growth of American trade and shipping is the demand for neutral carrying services and the changing conditions in colonial trade that warfare imposed upon belligerents. Two case studies illustrate the argument. First, the paper shows how American ships contributed to the import and export trade in Bordeaux (France) and suggests that the arrangements were beneficial both to American and to French merchants. Second, it looks at the growing involvement of American ships in infra-Mediterranean trade. Both case studies point to the relevance of American neutrality during European conflicts.

Keywords: shipping; French wars (1793-1815); United States; Mediterranean; France.

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1. Introduction

In the course of early modern history, Western European countries expanded their trade beyond Europe and increased interconnections among different parts of the world. This process, which some historians consider as a first, decisive phase of globalization leading to Europe's hegemonic policy in the 19th and early 20th centuries¹, relied on merchants' capacity to organize trade and to cope with state regulations and consumer demand. Governments tried to channel their trade in ways that were useful for the countries and their state revenues. In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, they enforced control over the flow of goods within their colonial empires and in their home ports.

The great majority of early modern trade, however, was at sea, either because there was no alternative (as for instance in the West Indian–European trade across the Atlantic, or in the transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas) or because overland transport costs were extremely high before the advent of railways². Controlling the sea and maritime trade routes was considerably more challenging than controlling land transport. Merchants and shipowners could efficiently organize trade and more easily circumvent state regulations whenever the economic context provided them with opportunities and incentives to do so.

Merchants acted within firms and interacted with other merchants within loose structures which historians conceptualize as networks. There is a very consistent bibliography on merchant networks, and it has been pointed out that they largely relied on kin, religion or “ethnic” characteristics³. Criticisms have been raised recently on the alleged benefits of this structure and on the validity of this assumption, but

¹ Globalization can be defined as the worldwide integration of expanding markets: Held, McGrew, Perraton and Golblatt (1999). Geographically speaking, globalization too often has been told as the story of the rise of the North Atlantic empires and of the emergence of a hegemonic British-American Atlantic world: Davis (1973) and Morgan (1993), or examined in the framework of the debate on European primacy and the role of trading monopolies between Europe and Asia: Pomeranz (2000) and De Vries (2010).

² Osterhammel and Petersson (2005); Kyle Crossley (2008).

³ Merchant networks did not rely solely on people who were subject to the same sovereign power. As economic historians and socio-economists have stressed over the past decades, they were structured on kinship, confession and ethnicity: Ben-Porath (1980); Landa (1981); Israel (2002).

this paper will not develop this aspect⁴. We will simply state that by the 18th century, privileged charter companies with a monopoly over specific trade had become rather the exception than the norm -the major exception being the British, Dutch and French East Indian companies- and that the bulk of the trade Europeans and Americans carried was organized by individual firms which established their relations with other firms.

This paper deals with an underexplored question in current historiography: which factors led to the organization of new trade networks? I will examine this issue through a case study of United States shipping and trade after they emerged as an independent country. Once they acquired their independence and peace was restored in 1783, American merchants had to renegotiate the modalities of the presence of their ships abroad and find new trading opportunities. If they were freed from the constraints of the British imperial system, they were at the same stake deprived of the advantages of British protection and the benefits of the British Navigation Acts, which they enjoyed as British colonies.

After 1783, the United States engaged in diplomatic action, ratified commercial treaties and built up a consular network to protect American captains abroad. The government tried to provide its citizens with favorable conditions to expand their trade. But this paper argues that the decisive element which explains the growth of American shipping and trade in the 1790s-1800s was the fact that American merchants took advantage of the war between major European powers. Neutral American ships offered their services. Like other neutral carriers, American merchants and shipowners were able to respond to the demand of transport of belligerents, but they also got involved in commercial activities on their own account. While speaking of “Americans”, we should be aware that the term included European merchants who had recently migrated to the United States and acquired American citizenship in order to carry goods they could no longer carry as subjects of a belligerent country. Citizenship was a variable of the game that merchant firms could play in order to organize their business and diversify their opportunities.

⁴ Recent historiography has suggested that merchants' success depended on actors' capacity to transcend mono-confessional and ethnic networks: Trivellato (2009); Molho and Ramada Curto (2003); Trivellato, Antunes and Halevi (2014, forthcoming).

This paper will explore the modalities of American participation in European and colonial trade and show how, thanks to neutral merchants and ships, Europeans were able to maintain consistent flows of trade and get around most of the restrictive wartime legislation imposed by belligerent countries. I will first survey the changes that political independence introduced for American merchants and show how the government of the United States tried to deal with the new challenges its citizens had to face in the international arena (section 2). I will then look more closely at how European warfare boosted American shipping by studying the case of Bordeaux, which emerged as the most important French port in the course of the 18th century, parallel to the growth of French colonial trade. This section will stress that political factors and the international context were decisive elements in explaining the growth of American trade and shipping; it also will show concretely how shipping and trade were internationally reorganized in times of war (section 3). Finally, by looking at United States shipping in the Mediterranean Sea, I suggest that the understanding of international trade dynamics requires a systemic rather than a port-focused approach, precisely because merchant networks were able to respond rapidly to changes in the international context and to shift trade from one port to another according to circumstances. Merchant networks' adaptability requires historians to approach trade shifts globally (section 4).

2. Setting new rules: American independence and merchants' opportunities

The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 had its roots in political and fiscal issues in part linked to maritime trade and duties. However, there was no major economic drive toward independence, and the United States had to adapt to the new context once they became independent actors in international trade.

2.1 Exclusion from British Empire versus new opportunities

During the colonial era, Americans were authorised to trade within the British Empire and to export non-enumerated goods⁵ and the product of their fisheries to Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. They could also sail to Africa to carry slaves back to the British Empire. All other trade

⁵ The British Navigation Acts (1651-1660) provided a list of "enumerated" products (such as tobacco, sugar, indigo, etc.) which could be exported only within the Empire. All products not on this list could be traded south of Cape Finisterre (on the northwestern tip of the Iberian Peninsula).

with foreign countries was forbidden. The loss of colonial status that came with independence implied both disadvantages and advantages for American merchants and shipowners.

Independence excluded American citizens from trade within the British Empire and deprived them of the protection that the British Navy, the British consular system and bilateral commercial treaties granted to all British subjects. American ships could no longer sail to the British colonies, although they could sail to Great Britain. They could no longer export corn and cattle to the West Indies, for instance, and thence take sugar to London. Nor could they carry Mediterranean goods to London after having sold dried cod to Catholic Spain or Italy. The British Navigation Acts forbade in fact any foreign ship from trading to the British colonies and introducing goods into Great Britain which were not produced in the country to which the ship belonged. Americans could still, however, carry tobacco to Glasgow and come back with English goods. They could also trade in the Mediterranean and travel to London on ballast in order to acquire there a return cargo which they paid for with their remittances of bills on London.

These restrictive conditions as far as trade to Great Britain and the British Empire was concerned could be compensated by the advantages of the freedom Americans enjoyed after their independence to trade with the rest of the world. American merchants could now legally and freely trade with the Baltic, the Mediterranean and the East Indies, and with those parts of the world where European countries or local authorities did not hinder the presence of foreign ships through exclusive systems or navigation acts. American historiography has celebrated the entrepreneurship of its merchants and the braveness of its captains in sailing into the Indian Ocean and to China with relatively small vessels in the 1780s in search for a market⁶. Trade to other areas, such as the Mediterranean, has recently gained scholarly attention⁷. As we will see, the theoretical openness of the Mediterranean coexisted with constraints linked to power relations in this region, notably those of North African states and privateering. The success of American shipping and trade thus was heavily conditioned by the possibility of trading safely –in other words, by

⁶ See for instance Phillips (1947); Goldstein (1978).

⁷ Field (1991); Marzagalli, McCusker and Sofka (2010).

the possibility of reducing risks and costs to a level which would allow American ships to be competitive in comparison with others traders⁸.

The United States faced the challenge of promoting trade and shipping through effective diplomatic action in order to counter the disadvantages of the loss of the protection they enjoyed as British subjects. Both Enlightenment ideology, which conceived trade as a powerful means to promote and regulate smooth international relations, and merchants' interests sustained American attempts to promote trade and shipping around the world. But this aspiration clashed with the existence of national and imperial rules closing markets to foreigners and restricting their trade to specific areas or routes. In the French West Indies, for instance, Americans were admitted after 1783 with major restrictions. This situation obliged merchants to adapt to and eventually circumvent legislation, while the American government tried to assist merchant interests through diplomatic action.

2.2 State intervention and merchant entrepreneurship

While fighting for their independence, American leaders tried to promote the ratification of alliances and trade treaties with European countries. The ratification of a treaty, however, did not suffice to initiate strong economic links with an area where American merchants had little experience, especially when economic complementarities were far from evident. The French case is seminal, as France and the United States had signed a commercial treaty as early as 1778. Politicians on both sides of the Atlantic believed that the Franco-American alliance during the War of Independence would open a new age of amity and cooperation between the two countries, and the French court expected that the alliance would deprive Great Britain of a substantial part of the trade with its former colonies. These expectations were rapidly dashed, however, and even before the end of the war Americans were already trading more with their former mother-country than with their French allies. Reports circulating in government circles in the 1780s clearly show increasing disappointment and bitterness on both sides of the Atlantic, and mutual

⁸ Aside from humanitarian and political issues, the capture of American ships by Barbary corsairs -which began with the prize of the *Betsey*, taken by Morocco in 1784, followed shortly with that of the *Maria* and the *Dauphin*, taken by Algerian privateers in 1785- had an immediate impact on insurance rates and made American shipping to the Mediterranean not at all competitive. On the impact of Barbary privateering upon American shipping, see Lambert (2005), pp. 56, 67-68.

incomprehension grew stronger as the years passed. Despite Vergennes' and Jefferson's efforts to increase Franco-American trade in the second half of the 1780s, the adoption of the Tonnage Act and the inability to negotiate a new, more satisfactory trade treaty point to the failure of Franco-American commercial policy at the end of the decade⁹.

In other areas, such as the Mediterranean, a strong commercial American presence required the United States government to establish peaceful relations –and eventually favourable commercial treaties– with Mediterranean countries. The security of this trade depended also on the evolution of multilateral relations among European powers, the Ottoman Empire, the Barbary States and the United States, which determined, for instance, the possibility of benefitting from the protection offered by European navies against privateering at the Strait of Gibraltar¹⁰, or from the mediation of European consular services in favour of American interests whenever there was no official American representative on site. The effectiveness of American Mediterranean policy, thus, was affected by factors which were partially beyond the reach of the US government.

Relations with the Barbary States have attracted consistent scholarly attention¹¹, but they represent only one aspect of the protection of American shipping interests in the Mediterranean, which implied also the establishment of consulates on the northern rim of the Mediterranean to assist captains, merchants and sailors and to provide them with information on the situation of trade and markets.

The decision to establish consulates reflects contemporary perceptions of the importance of the trading post as a destination for American ships. In 1785, the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs presented to Congress his suggestions concerning the establishment of consulates. The only Mediterranean ports he mentioned were Malaga, Alicante and Barcelona: “Whether the present commerce

⁹ Hill (1979). See also Marzagalli (2008a).

¹⁰ During the War of Independence, American ships were protected by France. Thereafter, although relations with Barbary powers were still unsettled, US ships sailed to the Mediterranean under the protection of Swedish or Danish convoys. From 1790 to 1793, when Portugal was at war with Algiers, United States merchant ships also benefited from Portuguese patrolling of Algerian coasts.

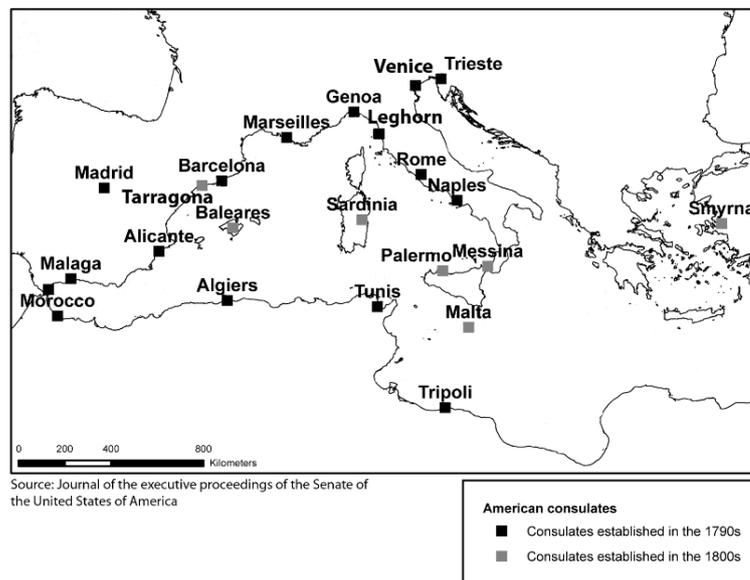
¹¹ Lambert (2005). On the American difficulty to understand the nature of Barbary diplomacy, see Folyan (1972); Kitzen (1996); Ross (1935).

of the United States with Germany [...] and the islands of the Mediterranean, calls for Consuls immediately; your secretary cannot determine with certainty, he rather thinks they might at present be dispensed with”¹². Clearly, the perception of opportunities for American trade within the Mediterranean was still confined to the Iberian Peninsula, where New Englanders were used to selling fish and grains.

When American consulates were finally established in the 1790s, their location was not surprising (see map 1). US consuls were appointed in Malaga, Alicante and Barcelona, but also in Marseilles, Genoa, Leghorn, Rome and Naples. Ratification of peace treaties with the Barbary States in the 1790s led to the establishment of US consulates in Algiers, Tripoli and Tunis. The progressive extension of American consular services to the Adriatic Sea and the densification of the existing networks in the Western Mediterranean in the late 1790s and in the 1800s reflect the relevant increase in US shipping and trade during the French wars (1793-1815). As a neutral country, United States merchants enjoyed great business opportunities in times of war.

Map 1

American consulates in the Mediterranean, 1790-1810



¹² *Journal of the Continental Congress*, vol. 29, pp. 831-833, Jay to Congress, 13 October 1785.

2.3 European warfare: when belligerents' needs meet offer of neutral services

The radicalisation of the 1789 French Revolution and the proclamation of the French Republic in 1792 provoked an international military response from most European monarchies, which saw upheavals in France as direct threats to their own dominion. From 1792, continental Europe was at war, and on 1 February 1793, Great Britain declared war on the French Republic.

As during the various 18th-century wars opposing France and Great Britain, maritime trade under belligerent flags became too risky, especially for those countries more vulnerable at sea, such as France. Belligerents' ships and cargoes were liable to seizure if they were captured by enemy navies and privateers. This risk increased insurance costs. When one belligerent controlled most of the sea-lines, as did Great Britain during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), long-distance shipping under an enemy flag such as the French came to a complete standstill.

Colonial trade was particularly vulnerable. On the eve of the French Revolution, West Indian trade represented over one-third of total French external trade in value. Its relevance was actually even greater, given that colonial goods represented an important part of French exports to Europe as well. Eighteenth-century West Indian trade was the most dynamic sector of French trade, and sustained agricultural production and industrial activities in France (such as shipping, textiles etc.) as well as other trade linked to the colonies (slave trade, re-export trade)¹³.

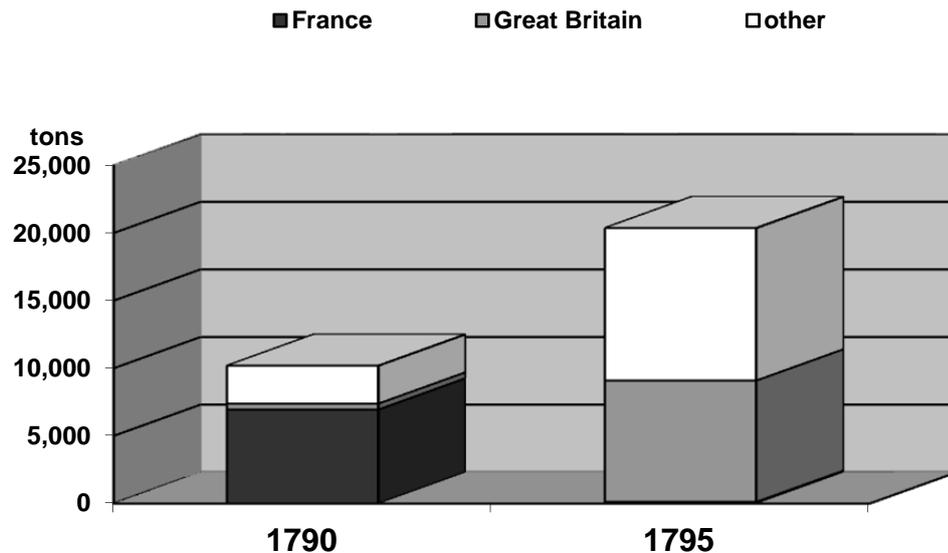
The revolutionary wars added other disruptive effects to the usual problems encountered in times of war. The successful slave revolts in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1791 and 1793 and the destruction of plantations on the island¹⁴ reduced the availability of colonial goods and initiated changes in production in the Americas, with Cuba, Brazil and the British West Indies converting heavily to sugar production. Moreover, Great Britain occupied Martinique in 1794. As the amount of colonial products arriving in France severely diminished, its re-export trade collapsed. Traditional Bordeaux clients in Northern Europe turned to Great Britain and the United States to buy such goods. As the major client of French

¹³ For a brief overview on French trade, see Marzagalli (2011a) and Marzagalli (2011b). On the structural features of French foreign trade on the eve of the French Revolution, French historians engaged in a lively debate which I briefly summarized in Marzagalli (2008b).

¹⁴ Dubois (2004).

colonial re-export, for instance, Hamburg in 1795 imported twice as much coffee as in 1790. But the city's merchants had radically changed their suppliers: whereas in 1790 colonial goods came almost exclusively from France, by 1795 a consistent part of the sugar and coffee was imported from Great Britain, and even more came from other suppliers, notably the United States (figure 1).

Figure 1: Origin of coffee imports in Hamburg



Sources: Baasch (1892), vol. I, p. 74. I have converted into metric tons the data expressed in *Faß* (hogshead): 500 *Pfunds* for a *Faß* of coffee (1 *Pfund* = 485 gr), according to Köppen (1973), p. 414. The total of coffee imports for 1790 being unknown, the “other imports” for 1790 is an estimation based on the mean imports of the two pre-war years 1791 and 1792.

French merchants largely lost their re-export markets for colonial goods, but they could still try to satisfy internal demand, and export regional products. To do so, they had to find new ways to respond to demand and to keep maritime trade alive despite all difficulties. A possible response was offered by merchants and shipowners of neutral countries. Neutral ships traditionally played an essential role in keeping belligerent maritime trade alive in wartime¹⁵. Whereas Great Britain did not tolerate direct trade between two enemy ports, ships could sail between a non-belligerent country and France provided both the ship and the goods belonged to neutral merchants. The British Royal Navy often blockaded northern

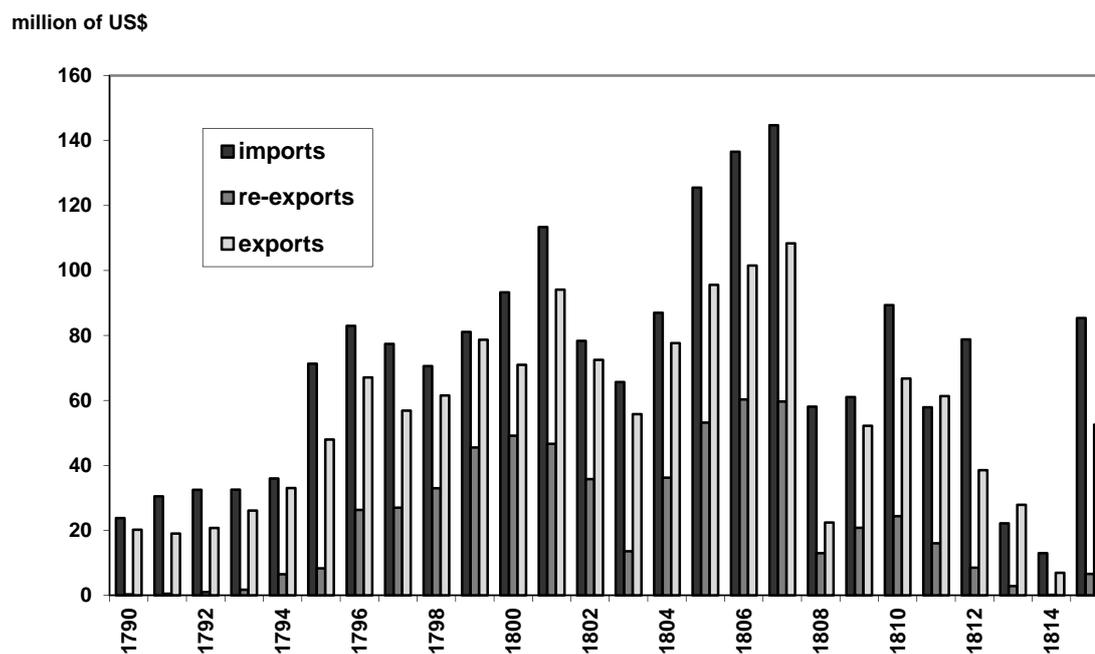
¹⁵ See for such phenomena in Bordeaux in previous wars: Voss (1995); Huetz de Lempis (1975).

French ports, but shipping to south-western ports such as Bordeaux was less hindered; this factor provided the city's merchants with a comparative advantage over other French ports.

The belligerents' needs created important opportunities for American merchants and shipowners, at least until 1808. The effects are evident when looking at the global evolution of United States foreign trade (Figure 2). The outbreak of war between France and Great Britain in February 1793 radically modified the conditions of Atlantic trade. For the first time in their history, American shipowners could enjoy the enormous advantages of neutrality: their merchant fleet increased in a spectacular manner, and their ships sailed on the world seas, rounded Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, and penetrated the Mediterranean as well as the Baltic Sea. The evolution of American foreign exports confirms that 1793 opened up a phase of unprecedented growth¹⁶.

American shipowners could either freight their ships to the highest bidder or trade on their own account. They did both. If they respected the few conditions belligerents imposed on international shipping –such as prohibitions on carrying arms and munitions, and on sailing directly between two enemy ports-, neutral shipowners could expect their ships to travel practically everywhere in relative safety. To American shipowners, the European wars offered, among other advantages, the opportunity of hoarding a considerable part of West Indian trade, as all belligerents had opened their colonies to neutral trade. The case of Bordeaux, which I will examine in the following section, shows how merchants on both sides of the Atlantic organized this trade.

¹⁶ On American maritime trade in this era, see Clauder (1932); Crosby (1965); Frederickson (1956); Coatsworth (1967); Toussaint (1951); Crosby (1965); Putnam (1924–1925).

Figure 2: US foreign trade, 1790-1815

Source: North (1960).

3. The case of American shipping and trade to Bordeaux, 1793-1815

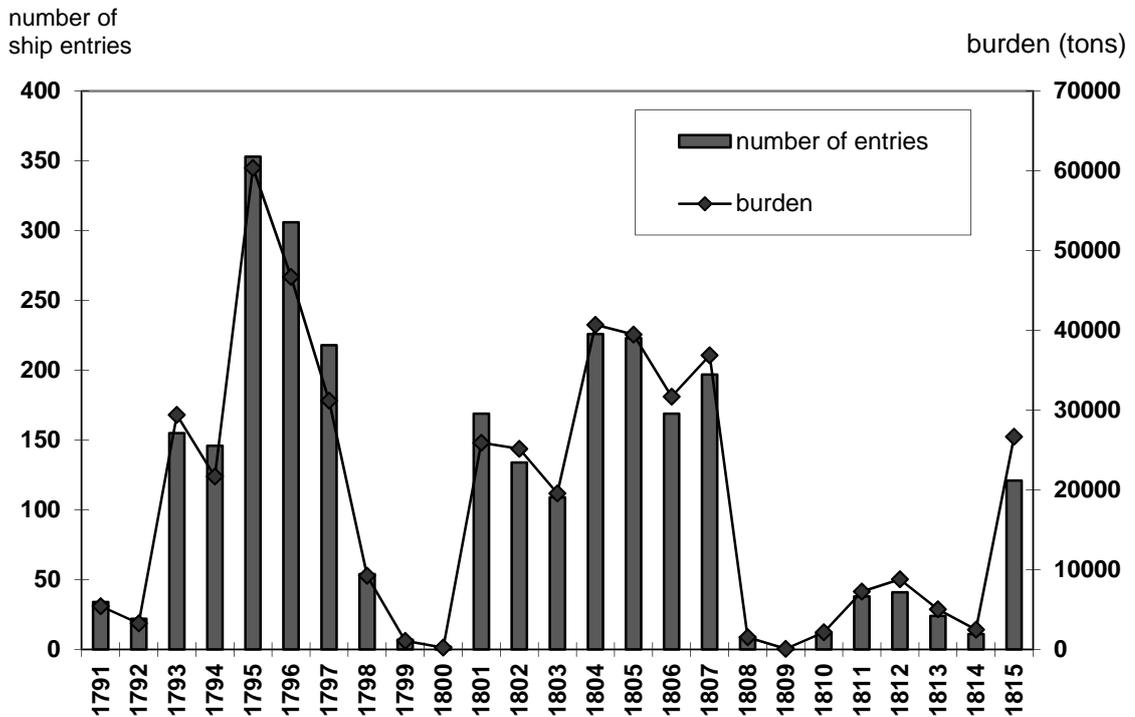
The case of Bordeaux is particularly noteworthy. The city emerged at the end of the 1780s as one of the most important French ports for Franco-American trade. The beginnings of maritime war against Great Britain gave Bordeaux a decisive economic momentum, as the northern ports in the English Channel were heavily affected by warfare. This situation deprived Le Havre, for example, of revolutionary-era shipping—Le Havre had dominated Franco-American trade as late as 1789 and 1790. Moreover, once Americans became the main suppliers of West Indian goods for France, Bordeaux, which had dominated French West Indian trade since the 1740s, became the main destination for American trade.

Whereas about 40 ships a year linked North American ports to Bordeaux at the end of the 1780s and in the early 1790s, more than 350 did so in 1795. I will not examine here the details of the evolution of American shipping to Bordeaux (Figure 3), which was deeply affected by the conjuncture of international relations¹⁷. Rather, I will underscore how relations between American and Bordeaux

¹⁷ See Marzagalli (2005) and Marzagalli (2014).

merchants came into being. I will first analyze the role assumed by American shipping during the French wars by looking at the composition of cargoes, the places where ships were equipped and their itineraries. I will then rapidly discuss the merchants who, on both sides of the Atlantic, organized this trade¹⁸.

Figure 3 - United-States ships entering Bordeaux, 1791-1815



Source: see footnote 18. For detailed data, see the online database <http://navigocorpus.org>.

3.1 The role of American shipping to Bordeaux

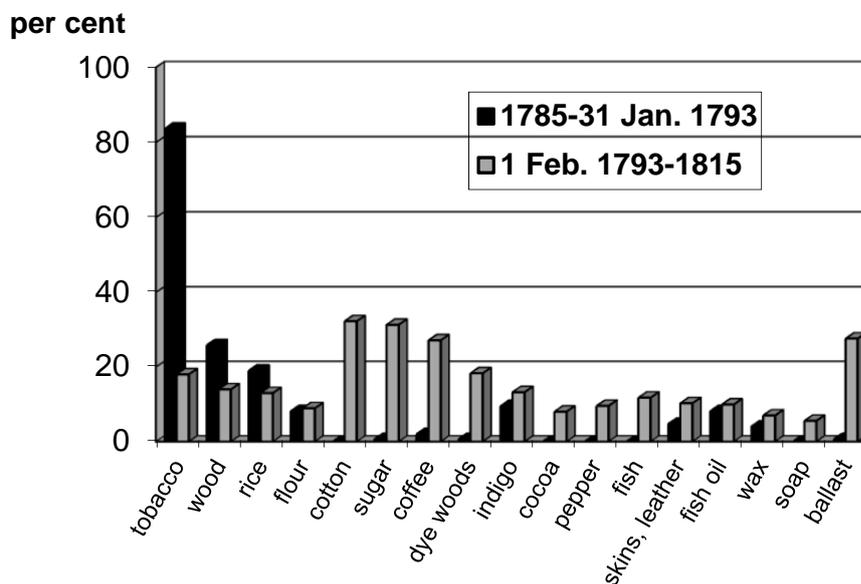
Like other neutral ships, notably Scandinavian ones¹⁹, American bottoms made it possible for Bordeaux to keep maritime trade alive during periods of warfare. Having built its fortune during the

¹⁸ Data for this figure come from a variety of different sources, both in France and in the United States. Information has been poured into a database, available at navigocorpus.org. The bulk of the data come from the National Archives and Record Administration [hereafter NARA], College Park (Maryland), RG 84, Bordeaux 26, 27, 176, and from a privately owned consular register for the years 1795-1797; these data have been supplemented with NARA, Washington, DC, RG 59, T 164/1; Archives départementales de la Gironde [hereafter ADG], Bordeaux, France, 6B 28 and Archives Nationales, Paris, G5/54. For more information on the establishment of this database, see Marzagalli (2005): note that the number of the RG 84 volumes have changed since 2005.

eighteenth century on colonial trade, Bordeaux could no longer outfit ships to sail to the West Indies once war broke out in 1793, but its merchants began to employ neutral ships and organize circuitous trade routes.

The nature of the cargoes carried on American ships to Bordeaux leaves no possible doubt as to the shaking up of transatlantic trade after 1793. American products such as tobacco, rice and fish, which made up the totality of exports to France before 1793, became insignificant thereafter compared to the huge amounts of West Indian goods and Asian spices shipped during the French wars. (Figure 4)

Figure 4 - Frequency of specific goods in the cargoes imported at Bordeaux on US ships before and during the French wars



Source: see footnote 18. For detailed data, see the online database <http://navigocorpus.org>.

Figure 4 represents the presence of a specific product on board, not its volume or its value. It lists only the products which were on board more than 5 per cent of the ships before or after the declaration of war on 1 February 1793. As the chart clearly shows, colonial goods became predominant among Bordeaux imports on American ships after 1793.

Besides allowing Bordeaux merchants to maintain relations with the French colonies, neutral ships also made it possible to export products from the hinterland, notably wine and brandies, which were

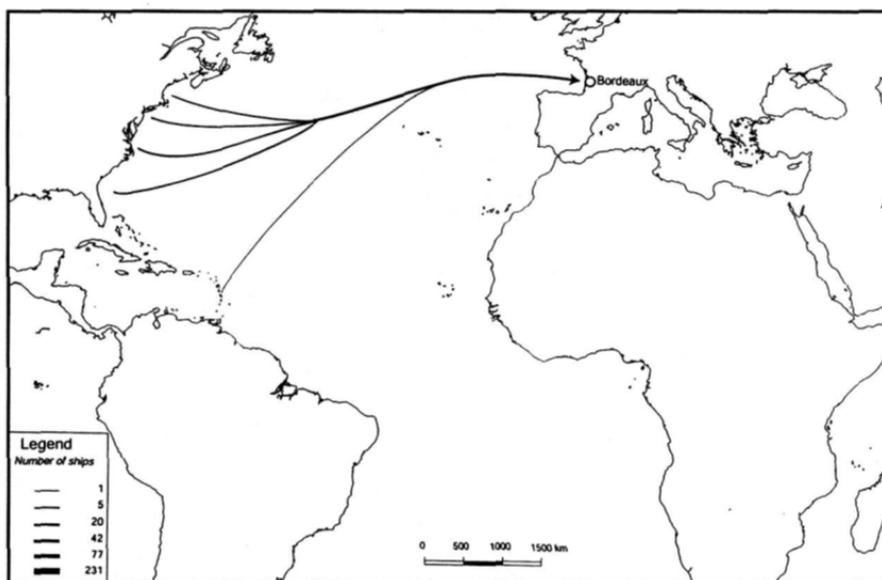
¹⁹ Andersen (2000); Müller (2004); Andersen and Pourchasse (2011).

normally exported by French and North European coastal shipping to Northern Europe and by Bordeaux merchants to the French West Indies. During the French wars, one American ship out of four arrived in Bordeaux on ballast in order to procure cargo: this pattern was completely new to the port, as prior to 1793 American vessels brought cargo to the port and sailed on ballast.

Before analysing the links merchants created across the Atlantic in order to conduct this trade, it is important to stress how these wartime shifts affected the geography of trade. The spatial dimension of American shipping to Bordeaux reveals the deep ‘internationalization’ of trade routes, which branched out in many directions (maps 2 and 3). In 1791 (map 2), American ships were exclusively engaged in return voyages between the East Coast of the United States and Bordeaux. Once the maritime war broke out, neutral vessels were the sole link between the French port and the rest of the world, and about one US ship out of four cleared out from Bordeaux to Northern Europe, Spain, Portugal and the Indian Ocean. Map 3 clearly shows how American ships calling at Bordeaux were part of a complex pattern of trade after 1793. Patterns, however, were even more complex than what these maps show. Whereas a considerable part of trade linked an American port to Bordeaux, this leg was just part of a much more complicated geography of trade.

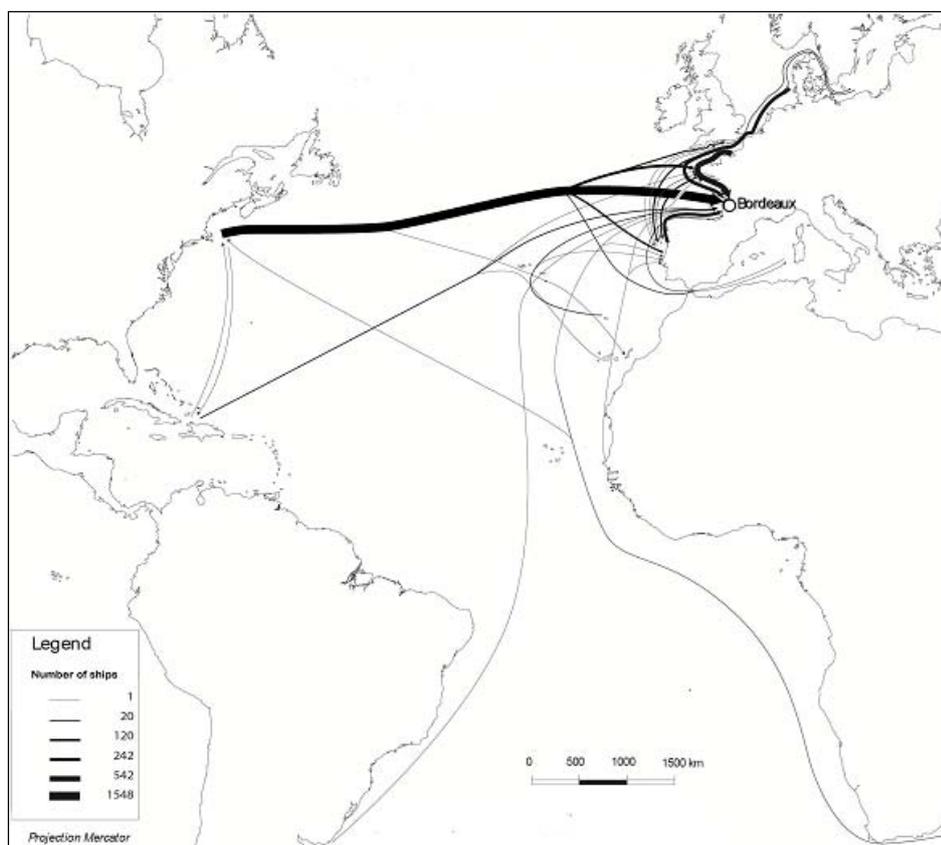
Between 1793 and 1815, shipping routes clearly show how warfare interfered with merchant routes (map 3): two ships out of three came to Bordeaux from a US port, though the cargoes they carried were not grown or manufactured in the United States but had previously been imported into the United States in order to be re-exported. Similarly, the majority of Bordeaux wine, brandy and dry-goods which made up most of the return cargoes were not for consumption by citizens of the United States. In fact, US imports from Bordeaux were largely re-exported to their final markets only after a call in a port of the East Coast. American ports became, during the French wars, huge warehouses for world trade.

Map 2 – Routes of US ships arriving at Bordeaux in 1791



Source: Archives départementales de la Gironde (Bordeaux, France), 6 B 281.

Map 3 – Routes of US ships arriving at Bordeaux, 1795-1815



Source: National Archives of the United States, College Park, Maryland, RG 84, and privately owned consular register of arrivals.

The official destination of more than three American ships out of four leaving Bordeaux was a port in the United States, but in fact most of the cargoes were re-exported once they had reached America. The brandy the ship *Brutus* carried to Newburyport, Massachusetts, on 13 March 1804, was re-shipped on the brig *Union* on 2 August to Guadeloupe, together with wine imported a week before from Nantes on the brig *Star*. The *Star* also imported brandy that left Newburyport on the *Brutus* on 10 March 1805, bound for the East Indies, and on the *Hunter* on 20 March to Mauritius Island, which was a French colony.²⁰ American merchants ordered their return cargoes in Bordeaux according to the taste of the intended final market. Jacob & Thomas Walden of New York, for instance, ordered their Bordeaux consignee, Pierre Couderc Jr., to sell the inward cargo of the *Thomas* and to ship back “fifty casks good Claret fit for the French West Indian Market.”²¹ Israël Thorndike of Beverly, Massachusetts, asked John Lewis Brown, a Bordeaux merchant, to charge some “good merchantable wine suitable for the Ile de France [Mauritius] market and at a reasonable rate on the schooner *Two Brothers*, which was to arrive in Bordeaux from Bilbao.”²²

The soaring number of American ships arriving at Bordeaux, the nature of their cargoes and their trade routes point to the depth and strength of Franco-American relations during the French wars. This situation lasted at least until the end of 1807, when Jefferson’s embargo and the evolution of British and French legislation towards neutral carriers made these patterns of trade increasingly difficult.

In the establishment of such an important trade link, a key point is to shed light on who took the initiative, who made decisions and who took the real risks. It is therefore essential to look now at the merchants who, on both sides of the Atlantic, were at the heart of Franco-American exchanges and at the way they organized this trade.

²⁰ Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass. [hereafter PEM], Newburyport Custom House # 282, # 497: Abstract of drawbacks of duties payable in the district of Newburyport on goods, wares and merchandise exported from the United States, 1804–1805.

²¹ New York Historical Society [hereafter NYHS], BV Walden, pp. 154–55, 31 May 1805. Emphasis added.

²² Business School of Economics, Baker Library, Boston, Mass., Israel Thorndike Papers, vol. 12, f. 27, letter dated 3 Oct. 1803. Emphasis added.

3.2 Merchants and networks

The majority of US ships calling at Bordeaux belonged to US merchants. Dozens of ships, however, sailed under the US flag though they actually belonged to Frenchmen. French legislation authorised Frenchmen to conduct false sales during times of war, and there were plenty of American merchants willing to pretend they were the owners of ships and cargoes, as they received a commission for this service. On 11 February 1795, Bordeaux merchant Nathaniel Johnson took out insurance on his *Bonne Henriette* bound for Dunkirk. The policy fixed a premium of 40 per cent if the ship sailed under French colours and 15 per cent if it sailed under American colours²³. On 24 March, Joseph Loring of New York, at this time in Bordeaux, swore in front of the local American consul that he had bought the *Bonne Henriette*, and thus the French *Bonne Henriette* became the US *Henrietta*. From 1795 to 1805, American merchants bought over one hundred vessels in Bordeaux²⁴. American consul William Lee had no illusions, and he reported that he had delivered about 50 ship's papers to newly acquired American ships but believed that 80 per cent of them belonged to Frenchmen²⁵.

The presence of Joseph Loring in Bordeaux reflects the attraction of the port to American merchants. Whereas many made business voyages to Bordeaux, some settled there and they were among the most successful houses in the relatively concentrated business of consignments of American ships and cargoes entering Bordeaux. From 1795 to 1815, thirteen houses received half the cargoes, the number of consignments being between 20 and 112 ships each. Half of these firms were already active before 1795 and none of them emerged after 1802: as Bordeaux was a relatively new market for the Americans, having been there for a few years and having had the time to be known gave a comparative advantage to the houses who managed to get a position in the city. The American consuls benefited also from their appointments, which conferred respectability.

²³ ADG, 3E 35916 (microfilm 2 MI 8274), 3 prairial III (22 May 1795).

²⁴ NARA, RG 76, # 144, Bound Records relating to Spoliation Claims: Consular registers for Protests, Bordeaux, 1795-1799; RG 84, Bordeaux Consulate, C20, 222, list of vessels cleared under Consular certificate and Consular registers for Protests, 1801-1815.

²⁵ NARA, T 164/1, W. Lee to the US State Secretary, Bordeaux, 26 April 1805.

Nine out of these 13 merchant houses were led by Americans who immigrated to Bordeaux. Three of the four remaining houses associated brothers, one of whom lived in the United States and had American citizenship. Each of these 13 houses dealt with ships registered in different ports of the East Coast, but most had stronger links with a specific port or group of ports²⁶.

The importance of US houses in Bordeaux seems to point to American control of Bordeaux markets. One gets a different image, however, when looking at this trade from the perspective of US ports. There was certainly a strong concentration of business in six major ports, whose merchants fitted out three out of four ships arriving at Bordeaux. New York, Philadelphia and Boston fitted out more than 400 ships each, followed by Baltimore, Charleston (S.C.) and Salem (Mass.) with 100 to 200 ships each. The frequency of links to France increased the comparative advantage of these ports, which received more fresh information than ports which only occasionally traded to Bordeaux. The importance of recent information is particularly relevant in times of war, when belligerents continuously alter maritime trade conditions through embargos, blockades, seizures and new commercial policy. The French wars contributed to accelerate the concentration of business in a few US ports.

Although trade tended to concentrate in these ports, in none of them was there any significant concentration in the hands of a few merchant houses. The most important New York shipowner trading to Bordeaux was Stephen Jumel, actually a Frenchman who moved in 1793 from Saint-Domingue to the United States after the slave revolt. With 40 expeditions, Jumel's ships accounted for less than 2 per cent of total US expeditions to Bordeaux. No more than a dozen American merchant houses fitted out regularly to Bordeaux and none accounted for more than 15 expeditions. Two out of three were led by French emigrants who were naturalised American citizens.

The Franco-American trade networks which developed in the 1790s, like most new merchant networks, relied on migration and settlement in foreign countries. French merchants, both from Bordeaux and the French West Indies, settled in the United States, while American merchants migrated to Bordeaux. However, despite the relevance of Bordeaux for United States shipping during the French wars, there was no sign of concentration in this market. If most American shipowners fit out at least one ship to Bordeaux

²⁶ For more details, see Marzagalli (2005) and Marzagalli (2014).

in the course of the wars, none of them specialised in this trade. To Americans, Bordeaux and other French ports were simply one possible destination on world markets. Bordeaux was indeed the second-most important destination for ships clearing out from New York from 1800 to 1810, after Liverpool but before London²⁷. But other ports and other areas were potentially just as attractive, as the following analysis of the Mediterranean will show.

4. United States shipping in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean was traditionally relevant for American shipping and trade. It was also an area characterised by the presence of a multiplicity of actors and a critical balance between European powers on the one side, and the Ottoman Empire and the Barbary States on the other.

In 1790, the Congress required Thomas Jefferson to report on Mediterranean trade. His report tried to assess the overall importance of this trade before independence. Jefferson estimated that the Mediterranean had absorbed about one-sixth of the total export of wheat and flour of the Thirteen Colonies, a quarter of the exported fish and some rice²⁸. This trade required, according to the data he could collect, 80 to 100 ships a year. The report stated that “Our navigation... into the Mediterranean, has not been resumed at all since the peace”, but in fact, American shipping and trade were far from being irrelevant at this time: export trade to “Southern Europe” – a category which included the whole Iberian Peninsula but not France, just as under British rule - averaged \$4 million from 1790 to 1793, or 15 per cent of total US exports – a figure corresponding to John McCusker’s estimate of the relative importance of Southern Europe for the Thirteen Colonies in 1768-1772²⁹, but representing twice as much in absolute value because of the general increase in American trade.

American trade developed even more consistently after 1793, when the Franco-British conflict increased European demand for neutral transport services. The news of the peace with Algiers, Tripoli and Tunis in the 1790s gave a decisive impulse to US shipping in the Mediterranean.

²⁷ Luke (1953), appendix.

²⁸ *American State Papers*, Foreign Relations, vol. 1, no. 44.

²⁹ McCusker (2010).

4.1 Methodological problems in assessing the relevance of US trade to the Mediterranean

Assessing the importance of United States shipping and trade to the Mediterranean is an extremely delicate and probably impossible task. American authorities recorded export values according to the country of destination, and not to specific geographical areas, such as the Mediterranean. Both France and Spain had an Atlantic as well as a Mediterranean coast, so that it is impossible to assess the part of each in official statistics. If this is frustrating to historians, it proved quite unsatisfactory for contemporary American policy-makers as well: in 1802, “in obedience to the resolution of the House of Representatives”, the secretary of the treasury “respectfully report[ed] that the documents in the Treasury do not discriminate the Exports of the United States to Spanish and French ports, in the Mediterranean, from those to ports of the same nations respectively on the Atlantic”³⁰.

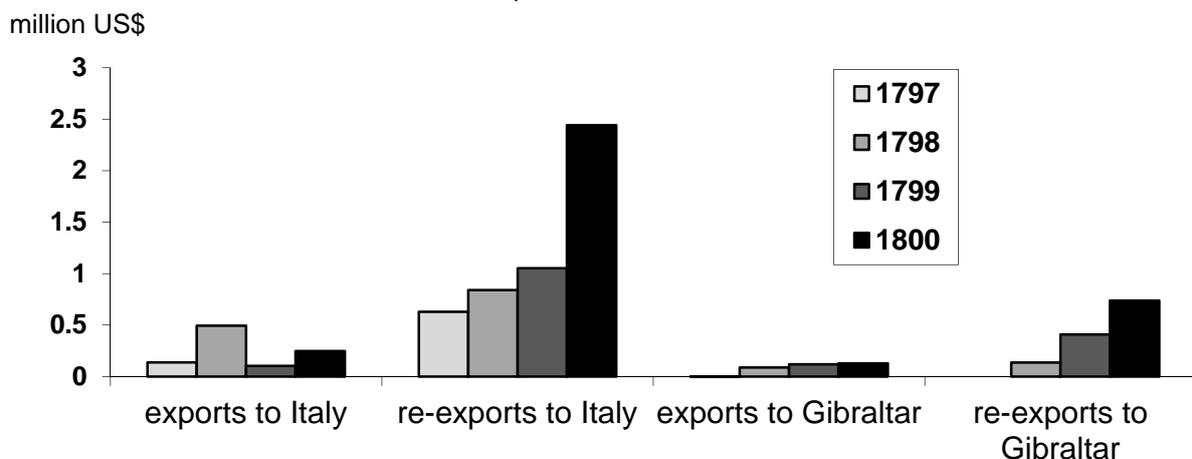
If the American balance of trade is highly unsatisfactory for historians wishing to determine the relative importance of the Mediterranean for American interests, it is particularly frustrating for understanding the economic interests which might have induced the United States to engage in a war against Tripoli (1801-1805) to secure American shipping to the Mediterranean. A second major reason why such data are disappointing is that imports and exports represented only a part of the business that American ships were carrying in the Mediterranean; as we will see, their transport services acquired increasing importance and ensured a major, if not quantifiable part of American shipowners’ profits. Despite the intrinsic limits of the balance of trade, its evolution over time points, however, to some interesting trends.

By the time Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin presented his report to the House of Representatives in January 1802, the French Revolutionary wars had provoked an enormous boom in American foreign trade. The secretary prudently confined his report to the value of trade with Italian ports and Gibraltar. The evolution of trade to these areas (Figure 5) shows the positive impact of war upon American trade which we have already appreciated at a macro level in Figure 2. As, according to

³⁰ *Letter and report from the Secretary of the Treasury accompanying a statement of the value of the exports of the United States to the ports of Italy, Gibraltar and the Barbary powers, for each of the five years preceding the 30th of September, 1801...* (Washington, sn, 1802) [Early American Imprints. Series II. Shaw-Shoemaker].

contemporary estimates, the number of US ships in the Mediterranean had not consistently increased yet – but this perception will need to be confirmed by archival research – it can be assumed that the increase in the value of this trade relies on the fact that they carried as much valuable cargoes as before. US products did not increase, but re-export trade boomed: as in Bordeaux, American ships introduced West Indian goods into Mediterranean ports which France was no longer able to import directly and redistribute.

Figure 5: American exports and re-exports to Italy and Gibraltar, 1797-1800



Source: Letter and report from the Secretary of the Treasury accompanying a statement of the value of the exports of the United States to the ports of Italy, Gibraltar and the Barbary powers, for each of the five years preceding the 30th of September, 1801 ... (Washington, 1802) [Early American Imprints. Series II. Shaw-Shoemaker].

Neutrality was not unproblematic, however, especially in the Mediterranean, where American ships found their way amidst overlapping conflicts. They were not entirely safe from the Barbary States, as the maritime and economic war between France and Great Britain and the expansion of France in the Mediterranean after 1796 provoked frequent military occupations and blockades of major ports and constantly altered regular patterns of trade. As time passed, French attempts to prevent the import of British manufactures provoked the organisation of smuggling routes, to which American ships

contributed. The establishment of consular services on the Mediterranean islands might indeed reflect these changes³¹.

In order to better understand how American merchants and shipowners integrated Mediterranean trade, we need to move from aggregated data and trade statistics to records concerning ships. Such records enable us to reconstruct the volume of American shipping into the Mediterranean, to track ships' itineraries and to understand their owners' strategies.

The records of the United States consulates in the Mediterranean are the best possible source for reconstructing American shipping in this area³². Consuls had to keep a register of incoming American ships and record their departure. They were also supposed to keep a register of American crew members and cargo manifests. These registers were kept at the consulate so the consul could provide official statements whenever he was required to. Unfortunately, they have not been systematically repatriated in Record Group 84 at the US National Archives. I have presented elsewhere, in more detail, the first results I drew from these archival records; here I will concentrate on a few main characteristics³³.

4.2 American shipping in the Mediterranean: Main characteristics.

The number of American ships sailing into the Mediterranean grew consistently since the mid-1790s, once the United States was able to negotiate peace treaties with the Barbary States. By 1807, American shipping reached a peak. Using records for an incomplete series of ports (Leghorn, Marseille, Palermo, Tunis, Malaga and Naples – but missing data for Barcelona and other Spanish ports, important destinations for American ships), I was able to identify over 240 different US ships sailing in the Mediterranean in 1807, and I estimated, by cross-checking with other sources (lists of ship-entries in New York and lists of ships captured by the British and carried to Malta), that there might have been at least twice as many³⁴. If this is correct, American shipping into the Mediterranean grew by 5 to 6 times from

³¹ On the shift of trade routes and transport services during the French Wars, see Crouzet (1987); Clauder (1932); Marzagalli (2005).

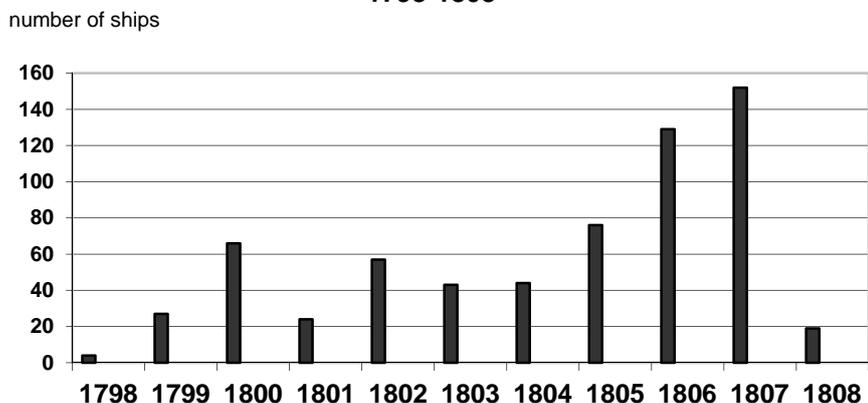
³² Mediterranean port records, unfortunately, do not systematically indicate the flag of incoming and clearing ships. Moreover, tracking American ships would be extremely time-consuming.

³³ Marzagalli (2010).

³⁴ Marzagalli (2010).

1790 to 1807: this path of growth is higher than those of other neutral carriers such as the Danish or the Swedish³⁵.

Figure 6: US ships clearing from Leghorn, 1798-1808



Source: National Archives and Record Administration (College Park, Maryland), RG 84, Leghorn, vol. 138 (microfilm), Arrivals and departures of American Vessels 1798-1817. See also Keene C. A. (1978), "American Shipping and Trade, 1798-1820: The Evidence from Leghorn", *Journal of Economic History*, 3, pp. 681-700.

The growth in the number of ships (Figure 6) is parallel to the growth of the value of the goods exported from the United States to Mediterranean ports. By 1806, American ships introduced \$5.3 million worth of goods into Leghorn, mainly West Indian products. This corresponds to an amazing 5 per cent of total US exports for that year. Although American ships left occasionally on ballast, their exports of silk, soap and wine were not insignificant, amounting to \$2.5 million in 1806³⁶.

Besides overall growth, two other features ought to be stressed with regard to American shipping into the Mediterranean during the French wars. The first concerns the increasing involvement of American captains in infra-Mediterranean trade. Comparing the itineraries of American ships entering Leghorn in 1804 and 1807, it is possible to see that whereas in 1804 only one ship out of four left Leghorn bound for another Mediterranean port, this is the case of one ship out of two in 1807; similarly, before arriving at Leghorn, one ship out of six came from another Mediterranean port in 1804, compared

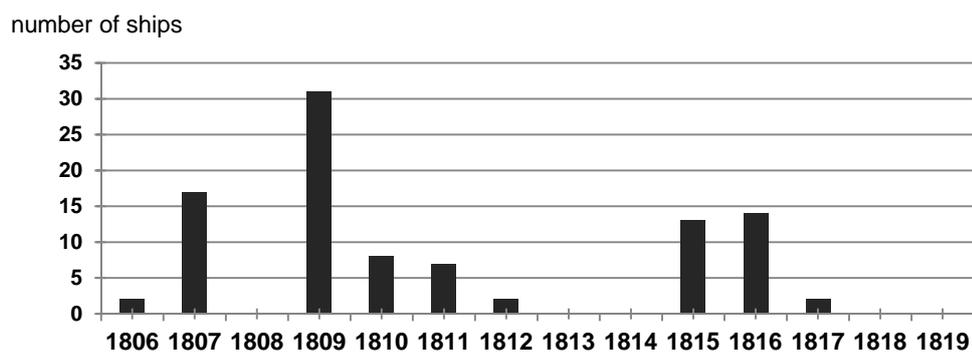
³⁵ Müller (2011); Andersen and Pourchasse (2011).

³⁶ NARA, RG 59, Leghorn, T 214, reel 1.

to one out of three in 1807. American captains were increasingly taking part in the freight business, which Leos Müller considers as the most lucrative business for Swedish ships in the Mediterranean³⁷, allowing them to link Mediterranean ports which were under the control or the influence of one of the two major belligerents. In order to connect British-controlled Sicily with the port of Marseille, for instance, American captains declared a false neutral destination when leaving Palermo (Sicily) and stopped in Sardinia so they were able to enter Marseille without mentioning the departure from Sicily³⁸.

The second important feature was the rapidity with which merchants adapted to the changing political context. Mediterranean ports were subject to drastic political upheavals as this area emerged as one of the main theatres of the Franco-British rivalry and of Napoleon's hegemonic imperial projects. As a consequence, ports were occupied by land or blocked by sea by belligerents. Trade shifted consequently. Figure 6 clearly shows the dramatic change provoked by the French annexation of Leghorn in 1808, parallel to the declaration of the embargo on United States ships by President Thomas Jefferson. However, whereas Leghorn did not recover, Tunis experienced unprecedented growth in the number of American ships entering the port in 1809 (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. US ships entering Tunis,
Dec. 1806-1819**



Source : NARA, RG 84, Tunis, vol. 51. Data inserted in the Navigocorpus database. <http://navigocorpus.org>.

³⁷ Müller (2004).

³⁸ See the example of the brig *Sukey* in Marzagalli (2010).

In order to appreciate the importance of the Mediterranean for the United States, it is therefore necessary to reconstruct the integral nature of the activities and itineraries of American ships and to assess their evolution without focusing on a single port or state, but, rather, observing the evolution systemically. Because merchants were able to adapt and respond rapidly to international changes, calling upon other members of their networks and establishing partnerships in other ports, historians need to look at the larger picture. Only thus will we be able to understand the connectivity they furthered not only across the Atlantic but also between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean or the Baltic.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown the importance of the shipping services that American ships provided both in Bordeaux and the Mediterranean during the French wars. Like other neutral ships, American vessels were in high demand during European warfare, offering great opportunities to American merchants, shipowners and captains.

Americans, however, did not only offer shipping services to belligerent ports: a consistent part of the trade passed through the ports in the United States and contributed to its growth. Many merchant houses could prosper in relatively safe commission trade, while shipowners could rapidly pay off the cost of a new ship by freighting it. Demand in neutral transport service was high, although, as the Mediterranean case study has shown, it could shift very rapidly from one port to another according to the international context, which the United States government could not control.

It would be inaccurate to depict the growth of American trade and shipping, however, as the result of individual firms acting in pursuit of their own profit. The United States government accompanied this trend by establishing favorable conditions: treaties, consular services and, above all, lasting neutrality in European warfare from 1793 to the War of 1812. The conflict against Tripoli did not affect American shipping in areas other than the Mediterranean, and then only occasionally. However, neither the individual struggle for profit nor government will to promote trade would have produced the impressive growth of American maritime activities if Europe had not been involved in an extremely long conflict. Neither the United States as an independent state nor American merchants as individuals could

set all the conditions which allowed for their trade growth. In studying the success of a given flag or a given firm at a given moment, an approach stressing interdependencies is more fruitful than an exclusive focus either on governments' or on actors' initiatives.

In analyzing the role played by Americans as carriers during a quarter-century of European conflicts, this paper has privileged an approach that incorporates specific attention to individual strategies. In so doing, it has shown the importance of individual mobility as a key factor for the successful organization of new trade networks. It has also stressed the capacity of merchants in belligerent countries to rethink international maritime trade in a context of warfare, by changing their nationality, for instance, or by covering their property through a neutral merchant. These strategies point to the necessity for historians to study international trade not solely at an aggregate macro-level, but by looking also at individual actors.

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