

ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, JULY 30, 1898.

BLOCKADE RUNNERS.

EXCITING DAYS RECALLED BY A CALIFORNIAN.

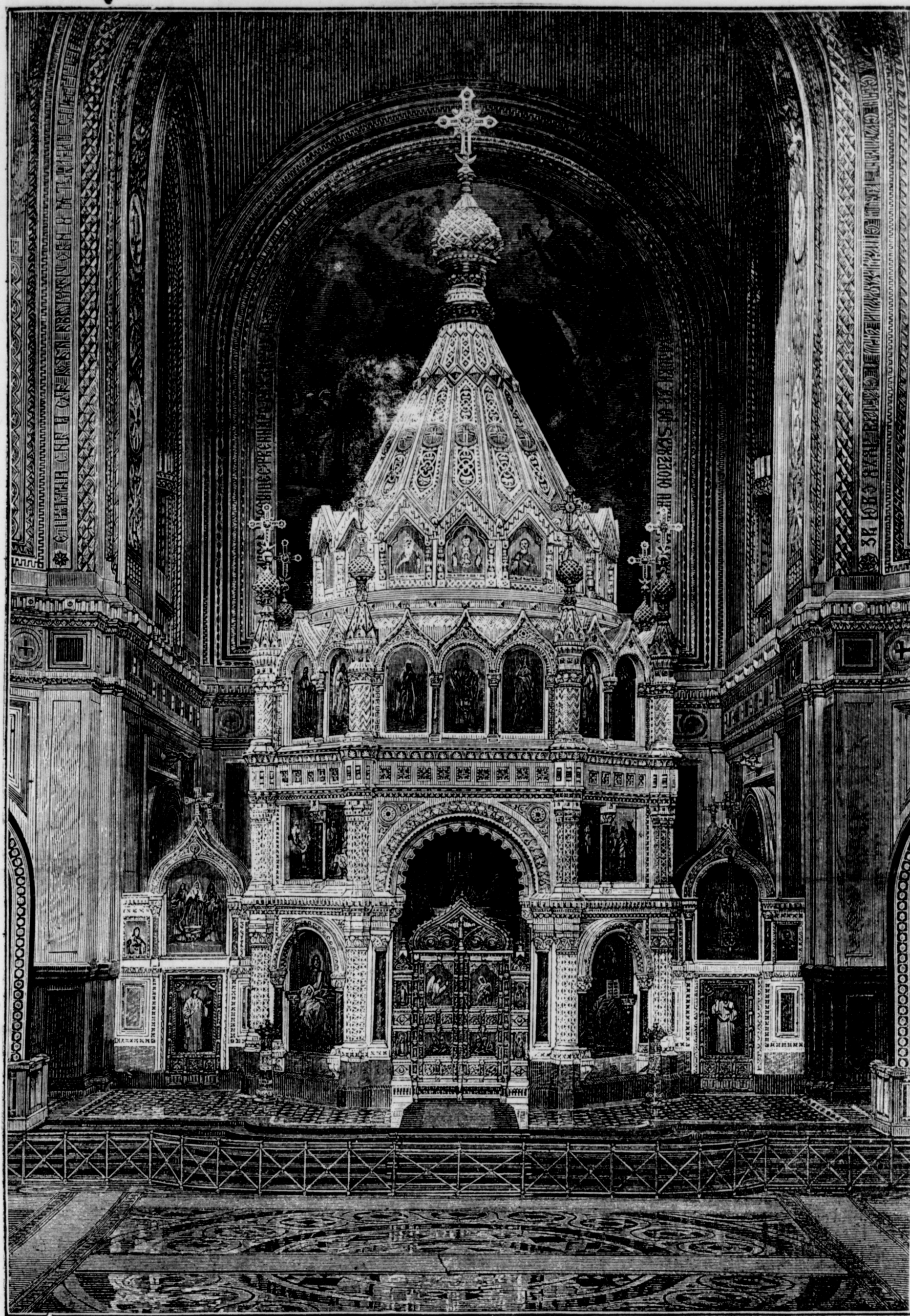
Profits Made During the Civil War by Carrying Supplies to the Confederates and Taking Away Cotton—an Admiral Fooled.

The Cuban blockade has had a good deal of interest for a wealthy sheep ranchman in California. He is Frank A. Gillett. During the civil war he was one of the successful blockade runners, and earned a fortune in the business. He was about 60 years old at the time and, having been a sailor for ten years before the war, he got a place as mate on a craft which ran the blockade of Mobile Bay three times. Then he got command of a vessel built expressly in England for running the blockade. He was a blockade runner in 1862 and 1863.

“There never was so great a naval blockade as that of the Southern ports by Federals during the civil war,” said Capt. Gillett the other day. “When the war broke out in April, 1861, Uncle Sam’s few ships were shattered all over the world. During the first two years of the war the naval resources of the North were taxed to the utmost to maintain a blockade along about 3,000 miles of sea coast. Such a naval patrol has never been duplicated. Uncle Sam had to use craft of all kinds and conditions to do the work. The two largest squadrons were those about the mouth of Chesapeake Bay and in the Gulf of Mexico. At one time there were about 100 boats engaged exclusively in running the Union blockades on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. First and last there were 250 boats engaged in blockade running. I have seen twenty craft in the harbor at Nassau at one time loading up with English goods for the Southern ports. By 1864 the Federal navy had been so largely increased and the cordon had been so strengthened that the blockade running became extra hazardous. Several of the best boats had been sunk by Federal guns, and a dozen of the most skillful blockade runners had been captured.

“The greater part of the blockade running was done by craft from England. Some of the boats were manned by English crews but officered by Southerners. As the war progressed fast steamers were built in England purposely for running the blockade. The Southerners had proved the best men for going through the Federal blockade, and they were employed by the English ship owners as far as possible. These English steamers were the fastest in their day. They were painted an ashen color and nothing in the way of spars or deck houses were permitted. The idea was to have the vessel inconspicuous. To this end the sailors dressed in dull colored garb, and white or black suits were never worn. When the blockade runner neared the Confederate coast no one was allowed to smoke on deck, and a thousand and one tricks were employed to make steam and at the same time not send sparks from the smoke stack. The funnels could be lowered close to the deck, and the boats were hung from the davits square with the gunwales. The steam, in case of a sudden stop, could be blown off under water. I never allowed any towels on board my boats because their crowing might attract attention. The steamer Richmond from Jamaica was captured in the fall of 1863 and about \$400,000 worth of goods confiscated because one of her men foolishly used pine wood in the fuel. Of course the blockade-running craft had to change their names often, and many strange names for the craft were adopted. There were no end of Yankee Jims, Yankee Bens and Brave Yankees among English boats. Among the blockade runners was a line of three boats belonging to a London firm. These boats were christened Letter B, Letter G, and Letter Rip. The finest vessel in the business only made one voyage; she was christened Col. Lamb, and was built to carry 15,000 bales of cotton. The war ended soon after she was built and put an end to her career as a blockade runner.

“The principal objective points of the



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blockade runners were Charleston and Georgetown, S. C.; Wilmington and Smithville, N. C. Savannah, Ga., and Galveston, Tex. Occasional runs were made into Mobile, Ala., Ferdinandina, Fla. and Beaufort, N. C., but as the blockade by the Federal warships was tightened, and as the service became more and more hazardous, the blockade runners gradually confined their operations to runs to Charleston and Wilmington, and during the last of the war Wilmington alone was accessible. Charleston was entered by the Siren on the very day of its evacuation, the blockade runner being captured; but for all that blockade runners had practically given up Charleston as an objective point ever since the beginning of the year 1865.

“The enormous profits of successful blockade running incited men to take the risks. The excitement was like nothing else I have ever known on the sea. We used to take chances that I shudder now to relate. A shot fired from the blockade runner in self-defence was, according to the maritime laws, cause for treating the blockade runner as a pirate. Several men were hanged in the Gulf in 1861 because they had acted like pirates while trying to run the blockade to Galveston and Mobile. For a run from Nassau to Wilmington or Charleston and back, a total distance of about 1,100 miles, a Captain usually got £1,000, or \$5,000; the pilot £700, and the crew and firemen about £50. There was always abundant material from which to select a crew, and the English men-of-war in the Bahamas

and Bermudas had difficulty in restraining their sailors for deserting and joining in blockade running. So much money was made in the contraband business that some blockade-running vessels paid for themselves in one round trip. That is, a big profit was made on the calicoes, woolens, hardware, leather and general merchandise carried into the Confederacy, but a still greater profit was made on the cotton and sugar molasses that was taken out. Calicoes that cost about ten cents a yard then in England brought fifty and more cents a pound in gold and sold like hot cakes at \$1 60 a pound. I once carried a cargo of cotton that cost 37,000 at Wilmington and sold for \$200,000 in Nassau. Here is a copy of a bill of purchases at Charleston by a company engaged in running Uncle Sam’s blockades in 1863. It shows the prices of merchandise we carried in those days:

Oct. 15—For 1 box (K) containing 400 doz.	
Coates’s spool cotton at \$12½ per doz.	\$5,000 00
For 17 rolls sole leather, H. E. W. K. 3,204 lbs. at \$9¼ per lb.	29,637 00
For 5 rolls sole leather, H. (W) C, W. K. 373½ lbs. at \$9¼ per lb.	5,323 37
For 4 cases fouscap paper H. (W) C, 50 reams each—200 reams at \$72.	14,400 00
For 1 case yellow envelopes (H P) No. 46, 100 M envelopes at \$40.	4,000 00
For 3 cases steel pens H (W) C, No 405—407, 300 gross each—1,500 gross, at \$8 50	12,750 00
For 6 gross, in case, 18 handles, at \$35.	630 00
For 40 doz. spades (W) at \$180 per doz.	7,200 00
Total	\$78,940.37

“Occasionally there was some humor in running the blockade. In 1863, when the Confederates were hard up for salt, Capt.

McMillan of Charleston purchased at Nassau a large centreboard schooner and loaded her with salt, clearing her from Nassau to Baltimore. He kept two logs—a false log and a true log; his false log showed that he was between Cape Hatteras and Henry, when he was really off Charleston. He dropped both his anchors overboard, damaged his sails, and appeared very much surprised when he sighted the Federal fleet off Charleston. He appealed to the Federal Admiral for assistance. The Admiral, being a kind-hearted man, supplied him with anchors and sent a sailmaker and crew aboard to repair his sails. Capt. McMillan spent two days with the Federal fleet. When he went aboard the flagship he bade the Admiral good-by and thanked him for his kindness. The Admiral offered him a tow-boat to tow him to the windward. This was what the Captain didn’t want, but he couldn’t refuse it, so he was towed a short distance. When he got rid of the tug, he hoisted his centre-board and began drifting back into the fleet. As soon as he drifted as far as he thought safe, he dropped his centre-board and ran the blockade. After loading up with cotton he attempted to run the blockade out, but was captured. The Admiral said:

“I have got you now, my boy. You played me a sharp trick, but I will treat you well. I will send you to New York.” And he did.

“I believe I am correct in saying that the blockade at Wilmington, N. C. was run

in the daytime only three times during the four years of warfare. The Gibraltar got through one morning in the summer of 1862. The fact is memorable because she had aboard munitions. The vessel had a narrow escape. Her smokestack was shot away, her pilot was killed, and if she had been on the water ten minutes longer she would have sunk, with several holes in her hull. She fooled the Federal for a short while by hoisting the United States flag. The Federals thought she was a new transport from the Chesapeake. The Will o’ the Wisp, Capt. Caper owner and commander, succeeded on another occasion in running the blockade in the daytime. The Captain was a Scotchman, and one day some of the blockade runners on the Board of Trade were guying him on the insignificant appearance of his vessel, which was small, but one of the best for speed in the port. She could make eighteen knots. They offered to bet him £100,000 against £50,000 that he could not run the blockade in the daytime. He took them up. It was customary for blockade runners to load and run down and anchor off Smithville, at the mouth of Cape Fear River, under protection of our forts, and then make the blockade at night. The Federal fleet saw the Will o’ the Wisp coming down the river and supposed, of course, that she would anchor, but instead she shaped her course right through the fleet. They had nothing that could catch her. They fired two shots at her, one passing through her cabin above the water line and the other carrying away her flagstaff. Capt. Caper won his £100,000.

“Oh, yes, I’ve had some lively times in blockade running myself—I was once in command of the Jonathan—a neat little schooner—formerly the Belle. I ran her through the cordon at Charleston on a very dark, rainy, April 1862. The stringent blockading was just beginning. We went over to Jamaica and unloaded. Then we sailed with a general cargo. It was a warm, lazy day in spring. We were somewhere off Ferdinandina. As we were lying there with hardly a breath of wind blowing black smoke showed up on the horizon, and it was not very long before I saw the familiar spars of the United States revenue steamer. Harriet Lane came out in bold relief. I said nothing but looked as if the game with me was up. Down the Lane came, and out flew from her gaff the British colors. I smiled to myself as I heard some of the crew declare she was a British gunboat. My supercargo was a Spaniard, Francisco Silas by name, and as the Harriet Lane run up to within easy speaking distance, I hoisted Spanish colors and told Francisco to reply in Spanish as I directed him. As for myself, I stretched myself out as unconcerned as I could, leaving Francisco to stalk about and play Captain.

“What schooner is that?” was called out from the Lane in Spanish. Fortunately we had no name painted on the stern, so that Francisco supplied a fictitious one in Spanish. To the question where we were from and where we were bound, Francisco replied, at my prompting, that we were from Havana, bound to St. John, N. B. As the Lane was coming up my supercargo remarked to me that he was sure the stranger was British. “Don’t fool yourself, Francisco,” I said. “Look up at her gaff end. Do you see that snug little roll there all ready for breaking out? Just wait a few minutes.” And, sure enough, the roll broke and out fluttered the Stars and Stripes. As they fluttered in the air the British colors slowly descended. “There, Francisco,” I said in an undertone, “is your British gunboat. Now don’t make a botch of your replies.”

“The captain asked several questions, and we thought he was satisfied with our Spanish character. He rang to go ahead, when I observed an officer go and speak to him. In a moment he and the officer levelled their glasses at us. I knew something was up, but what could we do with a schooner against a steamer in that calm? Presently a boat was let down from the davits and the steamer stopped. The cannon were trained on us, and we knew the jig was up. When the boat reached our side a young Lieutenant whom I had known in my ante-bellum sailor days came climbing up the sides of the schooner, followed by several sailors.

“Well, Capt. Gillett,” he said as he came toward me, “I’m glad to see you.”

“I recognized him and replied: ‘I’m not so glad to see you.’ He told me that he had recognized me through his glass, and that he had informed the Captain of his recognition. While myself and crew were taken as prisoners on board the Harriet Lane, the schooner was taken possession of by the Lieutenant.”

Many a man who has nerve enough, hasn’t money enough.