

Captain Peter Strickland of New England: Trader and Consul in West Africa, 1864-1905

by Stephen H. Grant

For the next twenty-three years, Strickland carried out consular duties for his country and simultaneously engaged in the mercantile trade in West Africa for his Boston patrons. In 1905, at age sixty-eight, he retired from consular service, settled in Dorchester, and became a gentleman farmer. In his "retirement," he acted as a commission agent for the Tennessee-based Luckett-Wake Tobacco Company and closely followed African trade until 1914. He died in 1921 and was buried in New London's Cedar Grove Cemetery.

Strickland's original writings are housed in three major repositories in the US.¹ At sea, Captain Strickland kept meticulous ship's logs. As a merchant, he maintained detailed business ledgers with names of business partners, lists of expenditures, and inventories of ships and cargoes. Not only was he a prolific letter writer, both with official business and personal letters, but he kept carbon copies of his outgoing letters (over 2,000 letters written between 1876 and 1921). In his retirement, he transcribed his personal diaries into hardbound albums (over 2,500 pages). At eighty-three, in true mariner fashion, he began his journal entry by scrawling the temperature and the barometer reading of the day, but his shaking hand let the pen fall in mid-sentence.

Today, the National Archives and Records Administration stores Strickland's official dispatches as US Consul. Included in the 272 reports are maps, photographs, postcards, newspaper clippings, telegrams, and special reports. These records include inventories of American ships which unloaded and loaded cargo in the ports of Gorée and Dakar, Senegal, marine notes of protest lodged by American sea captains, cases of relief to destitute sailors, registers of official letters sent to and from the consulate, fees and invoices, and marine insurance documents.

Additionally, Strickland wrote a book, *A Voice from the Deep*, published in 1873, giving his assessment of why sailors led such low and dissolute lives—they lacked the financial means to start a family, a move that might have raised them from their depths and nurtured them along the path toward strong religious belief and high moral principles.

(left) *The only known portrait of Peter Strickland appeared in the National Encyclopedia of American Biography (New York, 1899).*

CONSULAR DUTIES

Consuls today stamp visas, issue passports, and try to keep Americans in their jurisdiction out of trouble. The consular duties that Peter Strickland performed were quite different. He had no authority to issue passports or stamp visas. He was virtually the only American living full-time in Senegal. His consular services dealt solely with visits by American vessels and their crews to Senegalese ports.

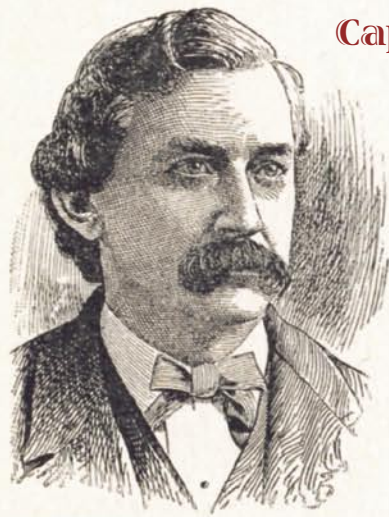
His duties were to record the arrival of American ships in port, certify to the health of ships' company, listen to protests from captains and crew, take care of sailors in distress, verify that ships' papers were in order, receive oaths from importers as to the value of their cargo, and authenticate foreign documents to be used in American business and courts. Consular regulation manuals included as many as 160 forms for consuls to fill out. In addition, consular officers were expected to report significant happenings of political, as well as commercial, nature.

WEST AFRICA

Today, an American consul receives airline tickets for self and family, is met at the airport, and is whisked to a furnished residence leased by the embassy. The government covers medical care and education allowances for children and provides amenities through the embassy. Consul Peter Strickland, on the other hand, was on his own. From his home outside Boston, he had to book passage on a vessel and pay for it himself. He preferred passage under sail, which lasted about a month and cost him \$100, whereas the steamship voyage to West Africa via Liverpool, Hamburg, or Bordeaux cost \$300. Once in Senegal, he negotiated a lease with a local landlord for a residence with a separate room to serve as the consulate. Peter Strickland was physically located in Africa, but administratively he was living in France, for Senegal was then a French possession. For his business and administrative dealings, he worked with the French, not with Africans.

During his first trip to Africa in 1864

SEA HISTORY 114, SPRING 2006



Peter Strickland

From New London, Connecticut, Peter Strickland worked his way up the ranks of the merchant marine from cabin boy in 1852 to master in 1864. Initially dedicated to trade along the eastern seaboard and the Gulf Coast, his vessels later ventured to the Caribbean, South America, and Europe. He made his first voyage to West Africa in 1864, carrying tobacco and lumber, and brought back animal hides to make shoes for Union soldiers during the Civil War. In the early 1870s, Strickland became convinced that New London was no longer a reliable location from which to secure berths on merchant ships. With his wife and two young children, he moved to the Boston suburb of Dorchester. There, he got a job as an agent for Boston shipowner Matthew Bartlett, who was sending a fleet of merchant ships up and down the coast of West Africa. In 1877, Strickland took up residence in Africa. A daughter and a son eventually accompanied him, while his wife remained in Dorchester with another daughter.

In 1883, the State Department was looking to expand its limited coverage of the African continent and sought out Peter Strickland as the American most familiar with West Africa, American shipping, and transAtlantic trade. Strickland was offered the first US consular post in the French colony of Senegal on the westernmost tip of Africa. The contract allowed him to continue practicing his business and keep any consular fees he received, but he would receive no official salary from the federal government. Strickland accepted.



in the schooner *Indian Queen*, Captain Strickland read over old log books and learned the horrific fact that the vessel “seldom made a voyage without losing one or more of her crew by sickness, principally what is called *African fever*. This seems to have been caused by her going to different places in the Rivers along the Coast where malarious influence is present all the time.”²² Strickland took quinine as a prophylactic against malaria and visited the local hospitals for vaccinations against yellow fever. Washington and Boston paid close attention to Strickland’s reports on health conditions in the territory—when yellow fever or cholera was detected onboard an arriving ship, word spread among shipowners and captains to avoid the area or prepare to spend time in quarantine. “The Coast” was considered “the sailors’ graveyard.”

The State Department assigned Captain Strickland to a post known as “Gorée-

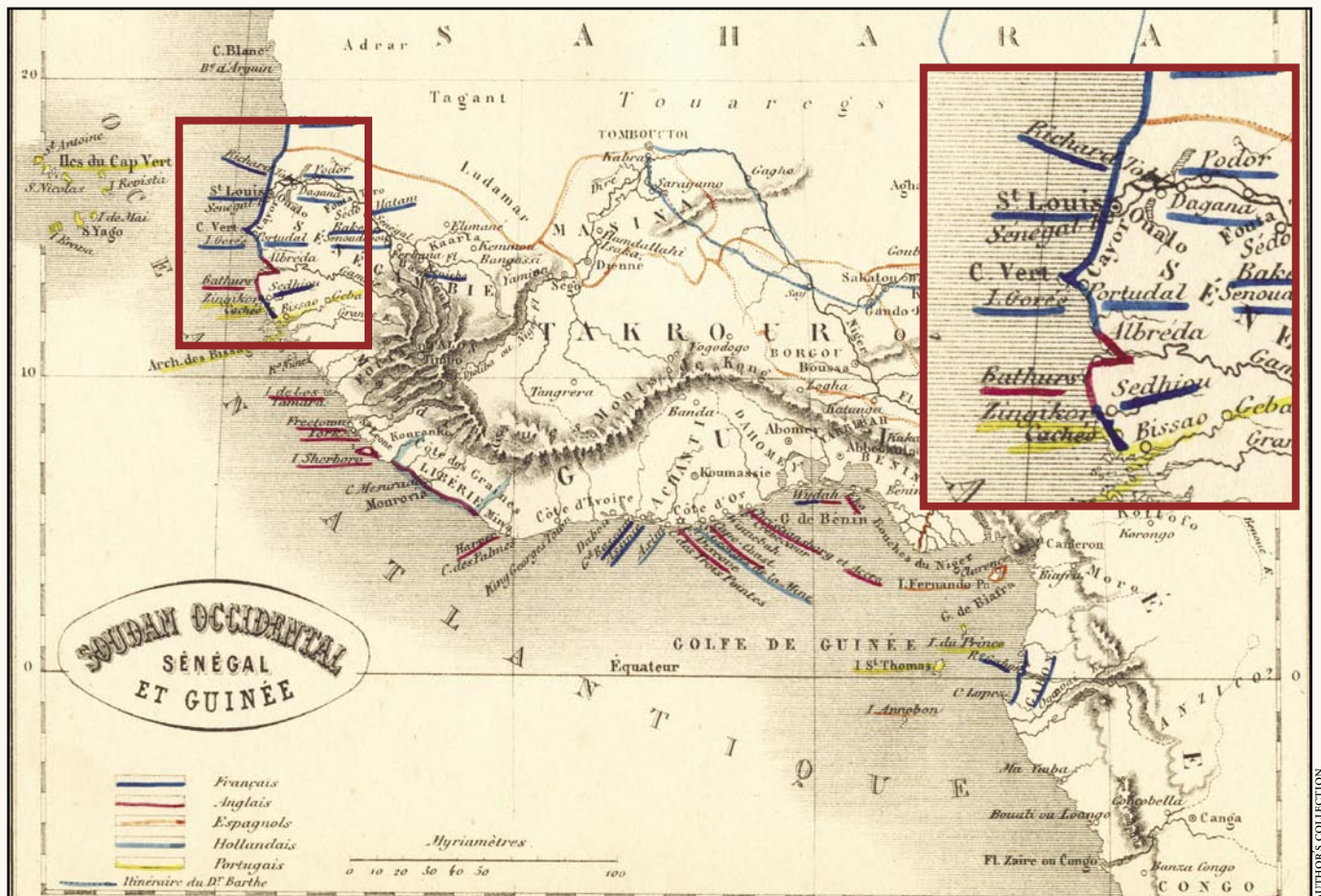
Dakar.” Gorée and Dakar constitute two nearby, but distinct, places in Senegal. Gorée is a forty-five-acre island off the coast, approximately two miles from the city of Dakar on the mainland. In 1883, Gorée and Dakar made up one municipality, hence the joint name. The island then served as the major port, the reason why Strickland elected to live there. On Gorée, a natural strategic basalt rock fort with cannon and ramparts is still visible today. The island had been fought over as a strategic military and economic outpost by the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and the French from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Senegal remained French until the country’s independence in 1960. Dakar is the national capital and, since 1900, has possessed the country’s largest port.

Gorée is well known as a place from which Africans taken into bondage were packed onto slave ships to make the

Atlantic crossing to the US, the Caribbean, and South America. Great Britain had outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and emancipated all slaves in the British Empire in 1834. France outlawed slavery by 1848. By the time Strickland arrived in Senegal, the slave trade had ceased, but some domestic slavery still existed there.

The commerce that Strickland engaged in for most of his professional life involved several other islands and trading ports on the African mainland—western traders rarely entered the interior. Bordering Senegal to the south was Portuguese Guinea with its main city of Bissau and other trading towns of Cacheu and Bolama. Further south lay the British colony of Sierra Leone. American vessels stopped at several islands forming the Cape Verde archipelago (then a Portuguese colony), three hundred miles west of Dakar. Strickland moved freely from French to British to

Peter Strickland set up the consular office and his residence on the island of Gorée, just off the westernmost tip of the continent. This 1865 map from the Bouillet Atlas, published by Hachette in Paris, indicates by colors the West African towns administered by five European powers.





From 1883 to 1905, Peter Strickland served as the first US consul to Senegal. He both lived and worked in the white building to the left on Gorée Island, pictured in this vintage postcard. The building still stands and is now painted crimson, a landmark visible to all ferry passengers from Dakar who disembark at the Gorée pier.

Portuguese territories within a five hundred-square-mile area. Africans in these colonies were subjects of their respective European powers. The colonization process was still taking place. The Berlin Conference organized by Bismarck to divide up African territories among European powers took place the same year Strickland opened his consulate, 1883. No one at that time envisaged decolonization, much less African independence, which would transpire less than a century later.

THE WEST AFRICAN TRADE: THE SHIPS

During his twenty-one full years as official consul (1884-1904), Peter Strickland recorded information on 255 visits by seventy-eight American ships: two-masted schooners (43), barques (13), brigs (11), three-masted schooners (6), and barquentines (5). Each had been built between 1858 and 1892 in shipyards located in Maine (45), Massachusetts (30), Connecticut (1), New Hampshire (1), and New York (1), with a range in tonnage from 35 to 790 tons, averaging 304 tons. The highest tonnage belonged to the barque *Willard Mudgett* of Boston and the lowest was the schooner *T.V.C. Hawes* from Chatham, Massachusetts.

For the most part, one can divide the itineraries of the 255 arrivals into two equal categories: voyages that moved up

and down the west coast of Africa (117) and voyages that made the crossing to and from the United States (115).³ The ships for which Strickland kept records rarely sailed “non-stop,” and ships regularly called at ports in the Caribbean, South America, and the southeastern US before completing the circuit.

These ships hailed from just six states: the New England states of Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, plus New York and Pennsylvania. These data reveal the predominance of Massachusetts in the West African trade. While Strickland noted merely the raw data regarding stops by American vessels from year to year, in the dispatches he sent the State Department, and in letters and his journal, the consul explained the downward trend of American shipping, which he witnessed over two decades. In the first ten years of his tenure, 176 American vessels stopped at Gorée-Dakar, in the last eleven years, only seventy-nine. Strickland attributed the decline to increased competition from Western Europe and a diminished interest in West African trade from American merchants and shipowners.

THE WEST AFRICAN TRADE: CARGO

An 1886 cargo list from the barque *Jennie Cushman* reveals a varied, but typical, cargo with tobacco in disproportionate

quantities and value dominating the manifest. Other items included a selection of manufactured household goods and foodstuffs. On her return trip, the same ship carried mostly skins and rubber totalling just half the value of what she brought in.

An examination of other Strickland records reveals dozens of other types of American merchandise unloaded at Gorée-Dakar between 1884 and 1904, among them: whale products, anchors and chains, cordage, pork, beef, and ham, cattle, codfish and herring, lobsters, oysters, oranges and apples, cat-

sup, sarsaparilla, a sugar mill, a windmill, cigars and rum, baby carriages, bicycles, washstands and cradles, rocking chairs, organs and other musical instruments, clocks and lamps, and ice. Most of these products would be sold to the large French mercantile houses headquartered in Bordeaux and Marseilles, which maintained branch commercial outlets or “comptoirs” along the West African coast. The outlets, in turn, would sell wholesale to French merchants.

Between 1890 and 1901 twelve cargoes of ice from Maine lakes and ponds were unloaded at Gorée-Dakar. The largest quantity registered at five hundred tons, transported in the three-masted schooner *José Oliviera* in 1887, packed in 300 bags of sawdust for insulation. In 1901, a brig imported forty-two tons of ice, the last time this item was listed on consular records.

The African products shipped aboard *Jennie Cushman*, although not atypical, did not necessarily reflect the primary exports from the region. Groundnuts or peanuts, different types of fossil resins (gum arabic and gum copal), and palm oil kernels dominated exports to the US. Gum arabic was used for candies and pills, gum copal was used to make varnish.

The stated value of inbound cargo to the port of Gorée-Dakar over the years

1884-1904 averaged \$11,792; the lowest value was \$40 for a single cargo, the highest was \$53,343. The outbound cargo during this same time averaged \$8,461, with a low of \$40 for one cargo and a high of \$34,260 for another. American ships made stops in Cape Verde, Bathurst, Bissau, Sierra Leone, the Rivers, and or St. Louis or Rufisque in Senegal.

PETER STRICKLAND'S OBSERVATIONS ON AFRICAN TRADE

As part of his consular duties, Peter Strickland included his assessment of the general commercial situation in the region. In an 1884 dispatch, Strickland estimated the annual amount of American trade in West Africa. He pointed to the fierce competition with the French. "The amount of American trade cannot be less than one million dollars in value, but of this only about one fifth part is brought here by Americans who have been constantly driven off by the competition because the conditions of the trade are against them. French agents in Boston and New York buy such goods as can be obtained and ship them directly in foreign vessels."⁴

When Strickland established the consulate, he recognized that the US controlled only about twenty percent of the local import market—the rest belonged to France. In his reports as consul, he explained that, when he first arrived in West Africa, the large French commercial houses employed agents in the United States to buy goods and transport them in American ships. In the 1860s and 1870s, the French in Senegal employed the few American commercial agents working in West Africa (Strickland was one) and placed their orders through them. Two decades later, the French handled each stage of the trade operation themselves.

In an 1887 dispatch, Strickland expanded his list of competitors from "French" to "European." He confirmed that American merchants were being bypassed. "It is for the interest of all large European concerns to discourage as much as possible direct trade with America: hence they curtail their dealing with resident American merchants and import such articles of American production as are absolutely needed in the prosecution

of their business, either through their correspondents in Europe or if the articles be bulky sometimes direct from America."

In 1891, Strickland lamented that the Europeans were conquering the West African market with their large fast steamships while the United States was still sending a few meager sailing vessels. In a letter to a friend in New York City, he wrote in metaphorical terms, "Uncle Sam is taking the sleep of Rip van Winkle while the parasites of Europe are corrupting his blood."

In the 1880s and 1890s the United States exported a long list of products to West Africa; by the turn of the century the inventory had declined substantially. Strickland wrote to a business colleague in Providence in 1903, "There is nothing American sold here except tobacco, petroleum, and cotton seed oil."

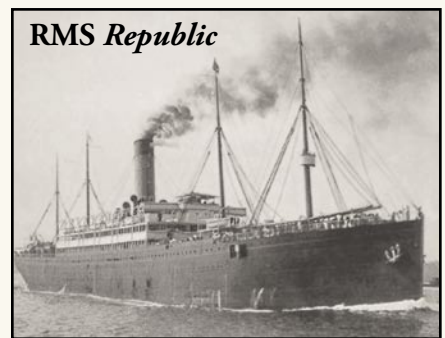
In 1895, Strickland reported that the stability of American commerce in the region was threatened by a new "discriminating duty of seven percent levied by the Government of this Colony and, I believe, by the Government of nearly all the French colonies on all imported goods that are not produced in France. This tariff came into existence in just three months after our own McKinley tariff began to take effect." Ten years later, Strickland left Senegal for good, not only in ill health, but disillusioned with the decreased American commercial presence.

Strickland's first merchant trip to West Africa brought back animal hides to make shoes for Civil War soldiers. He moved there to set up business because he was awed by the expanse and accessibility of Africa—ten million inhabitants living within his jurisdiction with an immense coastline. He saw the promise of vast marketing opportunities for his country without losing sight of the risks associated with living and trading in Africa.

Strickland's records reveal many rich details concerning the historic trade between the east coast of the US and the west coast of Africa, plus the types of sailing vessels that engaged in this trade and the value and precise quantities of their diverse cargoes.

While recognizing the boon to American industry in a post-Civil War economy, Strickland noted a steady decline in the

number of visits by American vessels. Competition with European powers and high tariffs ultimately proved too stiff for American commerce to thrive past the turn of the century. When he traveled in 1883 from Boston to Gorée on his own dime to take up the job as consul, he sailed as a passenger on a 274-ton barque. When Strickland retired from consular service and returned to New England on his last sea voyage in 1905, he traveled by steam. He and his daughter took the 6,379-ton French steamer *La Cordillère* from Gorée to Bordeaux and transferred to the White Star Line's RMS *Republic* in Liverpool to sail to Boston. Bracketing his career abroad was the transition from sail to steam—a shift in the maritime world that was nearly complete upon his retirement. †



Peter Strickland booked passage to Senegal to set up the US Consul's office in 1883 aboard the barque Jennie Cushman. Twenty years later, he traveled home to Boston on the steamship RMS Republic.

Notes

¹Repositories in Washington, DC, Mystic, CT, and Newark, DE.

²Peter Strickland journal, 21 April 1864. University of Delaware, Special Collections, folder 3.

³Not all data were recorded for the 255 arrivals. Averages were calculated for the ships with complete information, in this example 232 ships.

⁴Department of State, NARA RG 59, Strickland dispatch no. 8, 10 April 1884.

Stephen Grant, a native of Boston, served as a diplomat in West Africa for twenty years. The author of three books on old postcards, he is currently writing a biography of Peter Strickland.