Author Interview--Charles D. Ross (Breaking the Blockade) Part 2

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Hello H-CivWar Readers:

Today we continue our conversation with Charles D. Ross to talk about his new book *Breaking the Blockade: The Bahamas during the Civil War*, published by the University Press of Mississippi in December 2020.

Part 1

You already mentioned Henry Adderley, who has his fingers in almost every part and possible avenue of the contraband trade in Nassau, but from what you write, he did not strike me as ideologically or even politically interested. Was it just about the profits for him?

*CDR: I think Henry Adderley was mainly interested in making as much money as he could out of this crazy situation that had fallen into his lap. Before the war he was the most prominent merchant in an isolated British outpost. When the war magnified the importance of Nassau by a hundred fold, it expanded Henry's importance in a similar way. I'm sure in 1860 he was not expecting to become the first millionaire in the Bahamas or to have his name known in Washington, New York and London. However, I suspect there was some part of him that saw a more moralistic side to the conflict. His grandfather Abraham was a Loyalist who had come to the Bahamas from Florida after the Revolutionary War and Henry had done business with firms in the South for many years. So he might have had inherent Confederate sympathies.*

*Like most Bahamians at that time he was a devout Christian, though that faith might have taken a back seat during some of his business dealings. But he was one of the supporters behind the effort to send hundreds of bibles to Confederate soldiers in the latter part of the war.*

Speaking of money, one part that I am always curious about, monetary transactions are far more complex during this period and the Confederacy had serious money issues, were Adderley and the others paid in gold or Pounds? Where did the Confederacy get the cash? Even more did any of them get settled with worthless bonds after the war?

*CDR: The banks in Nassau apparently did not issue paper currency until just after the Civil War so transactions were generally carried out with gold and silver coins. For large transactions, major players like Henry Adderley certainly had accounts in England and even possibly in New York. Both Adderley and his son Augustus traveled to England during the war so they were probably making arrangements for a soft landing there when the fun ended. By war's end they were far too rich to spend their money in Nassau.*

The Confederates were lucky to have a financial wizard in George Trenholm to help them pay for their war. His company Fraser, Trenholm and Company had offices in England and a strong
international reputation. They were able to act as a financial conduit for the Confederates in getting them credit for cotton to arrive later. Based in Liverpool, they were key in setting up the system whereby Southern cotton was used to purchase war supplies, including the ships built in that city.

Later in the war, the Erlanger bonds were issued at 90 percent of face value and were redeemable in cotton. The catch was that you had to go get the cotton from a Southern port. The idea was to give Confederate agents in Europe an infusion of money and to stimulate even more blockade running. The bonds were somewhat of a success but many folks did end up losing their shirts holding worthless bonds at the end.

In the book I describe in detail one particular situation that didn’t well for the Confederates. Richard Waller, who been a quartermasters agent in Nassau, ended up being personally sued by Trenholm’s company for debts owed at the end of the war. Waller in turn filed a countersuit against the company.

What about the other sides (US and British Colonial Authorities)? It sounds like U.S. representation in Nassau was borderline incompetent? Was this trade conducted legally within British law?

CDR: The Doctrine of Continuous Voyage was an international maritime law that entered into what happened in Nassau. The doctrine stated that stopping at an intermediate port did not legitimize an otherwise illegal voyage. During the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s, merchant vessels traveling from the French West Indies to France were fair game to be captured by British ships. American shippers tried to get around this by shipping goods from the French West Indies to ports in the United States and from there to France. The American courts contended that since their nation was neutral that a ship leaving the United States for France was on a legitimate voyage and couldn’t be captured. British courts disagreed.

As the Civil War opened, the United States found the shoe on the other foot as British merchants attempted to evade the blockade by shipping to neutral Nassau and from there to the Confederacy. Having ignored the law for so long, the British didn’t pay much attention when courts in the US now said they wanted to abide by the doctrine.

Whether the trade was conducted legally or not is probably still open to debate but the highest authorities in Nassau certainly encouraged it. Many of the ships headed from Nassau to Charleston or Wilmington had St. John or Halifax in Canada as their destination. All the port authorities knew it was a lie but signed off anyway. The governor, attorney general and legislature in Nassau (which included all the most prominent merchants including Henry Adderley) did everything they could to make sure the shipping traffic remained high. In addition to merchant profits, the duties on each ship filled Nassau’s coffers to the point where tremendous physical improvements to the city were undertaken. Lewis Heyliger and John Lafitte, the most prominent Confederate agents in Nassau, were frequent guests of the governor and supported financially by Adderley himself.

In such an environment, it is not surprising that the US consuls were frustrated. Their attempts to deal with blockade running look comical and pathetic in retrospect, but each of these men had considerable skill coming into the job. The one consul who actually put a dent in blockade running for a short time, Seth Hawley, left fairly quickly and with his departure things started running wild.
It is indeed interesting to see how the war altered U.S. attitude to maritime law. To draw to a close slowly, you call the events “The Great Carnival,” was this a term used by the participants? Any indication why considered it a carnival?

**CDR:** No, I doubt that anyone caught up in the events used the phrase The Great Carnival to describe what they were going through. I saw that phrase used in a book called the Isles of Summer written by Charles Ives and published in 1880. He was describing what happened to the city when the war ended as the boats stopped arriving and the wealthiest merchants took all their profits to go live in aristocratic style in England. He said “Nassau awoke to find herself only weakened by the dissipations which the great carnival had caused.”

The phrase struck me as a great way to describe the Bacchanalia that ensued when the money and people started pouring into the somewhat astonished city. I think carnival in this sense refers to wild revelry in the spirit of Dionysus.

You have written quite a few works on the Civil War era, do you have another project in mind for the future?

**CDR:** Interesting question and thanks for asking. I’ve got research going in a couple areas related to the Civil War. My earlier book on the Confederate Powder Works heightened my interest in strategic materials in the war in a broader sense. I’m also doing some work on various scientists on both sides who were integral to producing and improving the strategic materials of the day. This current book also helped me to learn quite a bit about the fascinating history of the Bahamas so I’ve also been looking into what happened during a period that was somewhat similar to the Civil War days: the Rum Runner days during Prohibition.