



The Emily St. Pierre

By Ethel Seabrook Nepveux

“... this small body of men ... made it possible for the Confederates to sustain a war lasting over four years. Faced with so many almost crippling difficulties, it is a tribute to their initiative, skill, and energy that they accomplished so much with so little.”

— Richard I. Lester, CONFEDERATE FINANCE AND PURCHASING IN GREAT BRITAIN

The year 1854 was an eventful for John Fraser & Co. of Charleston, South Carolina. The company’s founder, John Fraser, died, leaving George Alfred Trenholm as principal owner and director. In that year the firm also opened a branch in Liverpool, England, called Fraser, Trenholm & Co., and prepared for a large international business. By the time the war came, 95 percent of the international firm’s stock was owned by the Trenholm family of Charleston. Trenholm’s Liverpool-based director, Charles Kuhn Prioleau, owned the remaining five-percent.

In the same year the company built two ships in Bath, Maine : the *John Fraser*, named to honor the firm’s founder, and the *Emily St. Pierre*, named for George Trenholm’s oldest daughter. Their senior captain, Eugene Tessier, supervised the building of the *Emily St. Pierre*, to the extent of even personally directing the rigging and cordage. On the maiden voyage, Tessier showed off his elegant *St. Pierre*’s mahogany staterooms and cabins to the ladies of Bath and Boston who were on board. The ship had a figurehead called “My Fair Miss” made by a famous carver which was supposed to be a likeness of George Trenholm’s daughter for whom the ship was named.

These ships, as well as three other sailing ships and at least one steam vessel, were making monthly runs between Charleston and Liverpool when the war began and President Abraham Lincoln declared a blockade of the whole Southern coast. George Trenholm immediately determined to show the world that the blockade was ineffective and therefore internationally illegal. To do so, he purchased a new and powerful steamship – the *Bermuda* – and transferred his leading captain to her. The *Bermuda* under Tessier was the first foreign ship to run the blockade when Captain Tessier easily took her to Savannah, Georgia, and returned with a valuable load of cotton. The inward cargo was worth a million dollars and included vital armaments for which leading Confederate generals competed.

After the voyage to Savannah, Tessier went on to an even more important assignment as captain of the Trenholm's new *Bahama*. Major Caleb Huse had been sent to Europe to buy military equipment for the Confederacy, but there were few arms for sale even in the arsenals of Europe. However, Huse eventually made a brilliant purchase in Hamburg, Germany, consisting of 100,000 rifles and ten six-gun field artillery batteries complete with harness. The Trenholm firm sent the *Bahama*, *Melita*, and *Economist* to pick up the supplies for shipping back into the Confederacy. After seeing her, the U.S. minister in Brussels, Belgium, was so impressed that he had a drawing made of the *Bahama* which was forwarded to Washington and along with the description of the vessel was sent to the commanders of the blockading squadron.

The Trenholm firm bought the *Economist* especially for the Hamburg project. Getting these arms back to a Confederate port was so critically important that even Robert Pegram, captain of *CSS Nashville*, detached his own first officer, Charles M. Fauntleroy, to command the *Economist*. Pegram believed that the job of getting the armaments to the South took precedence over Fauntleroy's executive duties aboard *Nashville*. On March 14, 1862, the *Economist* arrived in Charleston with Huse's shipment in excellent condition.

Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory sent Captain James Dunwoody Bulloch, CSN, to Europe to buy or build an entire Confederate navy. He arrived in Liverpool in June 1861, reported in to Fraser, Trenholm & Co., and established his office in their building. Soon thereafter he signed a contract with William Miller & Sons to build the wooden gunboat that would become *CSS Florida*. Fraser, Trenholm & Co. agreed to pay the \$ 225,000 construction price in five installments.

Bulloch, with Trenholm financing, also bought the *Fingal* and sailed her to Savannah, Georgia, with the largest store of armaments that had ever crossed the ocean, Charles Kuhn Prioleau, the Trenholm manager in Liverpool, was left to handle Bulloch's monetary affairs in his absence. The Trenholm firm took care of all papers, drawings, specifications and contracts for the commerce raiders Bulloch was having built. Bulloch intended to bring the *Fingal* back with Southern coastal pilots and valuable supplies to sell but the ship was hemmed in and could not leave. The *Economist* took on the *Fingal's* cotton and managed to get it to England, the first cotton delivery made on the Confederate government account.

From Savannah Bulloch took the train to Richmond to report to his superiors, then returned to Savannah and on to Charleston, where he reported to the Trenholm officials. Finally, he embarked upon a Trenholm ship, the *Annie Childs*, from Wilmington.

After a shakedown cruise, which included James Weisman, one of the Trenholm copartners, Bulloch sent out the *Oreto (Florida)* to Nassau under a British master,

James A. Duguid. The ship arrived in Nassau April 28, consigned to Adderly and Co., the Trenholm's representative at Nassau. Bulloch appointed John Low, who had been his second in command on the *Fingal* and was a family friend from Savannah, to be the civilian commander of the ship. Low received orders to turn the ship over to Captain John Maffitt. And Low found Maffitt through John Lafitte, the Trenholm manager in Nassau. After turning the *Florida* over to Maffitt, Low was ordered to return to England the fastest way possible because duties of great importance were waiting for him.

The *Bahama* was to carry the guns and equipment to the *Florida*. Tessier was beginning his most important jobs during the war, with the *Bahama* serving as tender to both the *Florida* and, on the next cruise out, the *Alabama*. In addition to his juggling of the delivery of the Hamburg supplies, the ship also served as an ocean-going taxi for very important Confederate Navy officers and seamen going from one duty station to another.

On January 18, the *Bahama* was chartered to convey to Nassau some of the guns and other equipment required to convert the newly built Liverpool vessel *Oreto* into the Confederate cruiser *Florida*. In March the *Bahama* entered West Hartlepool docks to load ammunition sent from London and by the end of the month she was in Hamburg receiving the four 7 in. rifled guns intended for the *Florida*'s armament.

Captain Maffitt arrived in Nassau May 4 as captain of the *Nassau*, a former Trenholm ship that had achieved fame as a blockade-runner under Captain Thomas Lockwood. Maffitt's son, Eugene, arrived on the *Annie Childs*. In six months some of the Confederate Navy's most illustrious men trod the decks of the *Bahama*.

In May, U. S. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles reported that the *Bahama* had left Hamburg with a million dollar cargo. The ship did not attempt to enter Charleston but delivered the goods to Nassau to be transhipped by lighter, faster, ships.

Armaments for the *Florida* arrived in Nassau June 7 on the *Bahama* along with Captain Raphael Semmes, Lt. John Kell, and Surgeon Francis L. Galt of the Confederate warship *Sumter*. The ship had been trapped in Gibraltar unable to sail and was sold to the Trenholm firm. The *Melita* also arrived in Nassau with armaments from Hamburg and more of the *Sumter*'s men including Lt. John M. Stribling and Lt. Beckett Howell. At the newly built Crown Victoria Hotel, Semmes and his officers socialized with Low, Duguid, Maffitt, and Captain Thomas Lockwood who was there in the Trenholm's famous *Kate*. Secretary Welles reported that Semmes and his officers were wined and dined and became the social lions of the hotel. Maffitt was especially popular, and there was scarcely a dinner party in Nassau that he did not attend. While at the hotel, Low handed Maffitt his appointment to the *Florida*.

In Nassau Captain Semmes found orders to return to England and take over as captain of the *Alabama*, first called *Enrica*. Semmes returned to England on the *Bahama* after the armaments for the *Florida* were unloaded for security reasons because the *Bahama* was being watched and sent to a bonded warehouse. The arms from the *Bahama* were later transferred to the *Prince Albert*, Lt. John Stribling commanding, and taken to the *Oreto*. According to one source, the *Prince Albert* was one of the Trenholm line of Charleston steamers. Captain Duguid returned to England on the Trenholm's *Minna*, but arrived too late to take out the *Alabama* as Bulloch had wanted. Warships had to leave England unarmed and with a British master.

When Bulloch learned that Semmes and his officers were to return from Nassau on the *Bahama*, he chartered the ship to send them back to Nassau. He staged the departure of the warship to appear as a gala trial run with James Weisman on board this ship also

as he had been in various other trials. As in the case of the *Florida*, the Trenholm firm had likewise advanced the money for this warship. Weisman, one of the original Trenholm copartners, remained in Liverpool for most of the war and may have assumed many duties with in connection with the Confederate commerce raiders. He worked with Captain John Randolph Hamilton to prepare the Trenholm donated *Alexandra* for sea. Bulloch and the dignitaries returned to Liverpool from the trial run on board a tug hired by John Low, while the *Alabama*, originally named the *Enrica*, slipped out.

Captain Semmes wrote that the *Bahama* had dropped some distance down the Mersey and that he joined the ship by tug when Tessier had her steam up and was ready to slip her anchor. On August 13, Tessier and the *Bahama* left Liverpool with Admiral Semmes, his officers, and Captain Bulloch to meet Captain Butcher who had taken the *Alabama* to Terceira. Tessier also carried two additional 32-pounder guns as well as extra stores and about thirty extra men who might be induced to serve on the warship.

Bulloch himself went on the *Bahama* which met the *Enrica* and the *Agrippina*, carrying most of the armaments, at the island of Pravda which Bulloch had discovered on his trip on the *Fingal*. There they transferred the armament and the stores to the *Enrica*. Tessier had previously transported many cases of armaments to what he called a Spanish vessel and this cargo may have been the armaments for the *Alabama*. On August 24, the *Bahama* put to sea and the *Alabama* unfurled the flag of the new Confederacy. Captain Bulloch returned to England with Tessier.

Dudley wrote that Tessier was superintending the fitting out of the *Alexandra*, a warship built by W.A. Miller at the expense of the Trenholm firm and donated to the Confederacy. This ship became a famous test case that prevented any other Confederate ships from leaving England, including some rams that would have been very useful to the Confederates.

On February 24, 1863, the *Bahama* sailed from England under a captain named Rowe. The consul at London wrote in February 1863 that the *Bahama* had cleared and sailed on the 21st in ballast, with a crew of 34 men, double the number required for working the vessel. She cleared for Hong Kong but rumors claimed that she was going to meet the *Alabama*. The consul wrote that the ship was bound on mischief and should be captured wherever found. In the same letter he mentioned that the Trenholm owned *Minna* had a valuable cargo of clothing and medicines and the *Emily St. Pierre* had cleared also for Hong Kong.

In July, Captain Tessier took the newly completed *Phantom* to Bermuda. She was yet another vessel the Trenholm firm had ordered built for the Confederacy by William Miller & Sons, constructors of the *Florida*. She was called "the fastest steamer afloat". In her the Confederate spy, Rose Greenhow, made the first leg of her fund raising visit to England.

In 1864, Captain Bulloch took Tessier to France to help with the building of rams and corvettes. He described Tessier as a man of intelligence, a capital seaman, and of course, a master of the French language.

The personality of E. Tessier and the functions that he occupied in Glasgow led him to become a prominent citizen. The obituary that appeared in the Glasgow Herald of October 3, 1901, summarizes his life achievements and the memory that he left behind :

“There were yesterday consigned to rest, after a long, an honourable, and an arduous life, the remains of a worthy citizen, and a notable man, the late Captain E. L. Tessier, of Hillhead, formerly the Bureau Veritas, at Glasgow, Liverpool, and Paris, and whose life’s history, were it written in full, would read like a romance. Of a good Breton stock, Captain Tessier was born at L’Orient towards the close of the second decade of last century, and as a mere boy he very early gave signs of possessing that indomitable resolution, inflexible determination, and sturdy, stern, independence which stood him in good stead on many trying conditions in after life, and characterised him consistently to the end.”

“Losing his father when he was a child his mother had him educated in a neighbouring college, where he appears to have been well grounded in both classics and mathematics. But college life proved too tame and uneventful for his stirring disposition and roving fancy, and so of his accord he left when quite a young boy and entered the French navy, in which he saw considerable service in the early Algerine expeditions and otherwise, and attained to the rank of petty officer when quite a youth. During this period he was for a time employed on dockyard service, and acquired in this connection a knowledge of the principles and practice of wood ship construction, of which, subsequently, he became an able exponent and unrivalled authority.”

“But leaving the French navy for some reason or another, he joined the mercantile marine, first for his native country, and then of the United States, in which he found more scope for his individuality and resource, and quickly rose through the subordinate official grades to the post of captain, and the positions of part owner and owner, after having acquired a reputation in American shipping circles for intrepidity and success in every venture in which he had been concerned. He eventually took up his abode, first at Charlestown and then at Baltimore, but before leaving France for good he formally renounced his share in the family inheritance in favour of his mother and her other children.”

“Settling down in the Southern States, and engaging actively in the duties of his profession, Captain Tessier speedily accumulated considerable property, and was married to a young American lady of a well-known Charlestown family. At this time the differences between the Northern and the Southern States had reached an acute stage, and when the War of Secession commenced he eagerly threw in his lot with the latter, and was appointed by the Government of the Confederate States one of their principal secret agents and representatives, in which capacity he was entrusted with missions to France and Great Britain for the purchase or building and equipment of vessels intended for war purposes. In France several corvettes were built to his order and under his direction, while in England the famous “Alabama” was commissioned and equipped by him.”¹

“His attitude and conduct all this time caused great trepidation and concern to the authorities of the Confederate States, who at length confiscated all his property within their reach. At one time they endeavoured to secure his own person by sending a gunboat to lie in wait for his ship, the “Emily St. Pierre”, which he had commended just before the war, but had given up to enter upon his new duties under the Confederate Government.”

¹ Evidently, the author of this speech gives credit to Tessier for successes and responsibilities that were those of Bulloch (Editor’s note).

“And then was initiated one of the most stirring incidents of the war, for the ship named was captured, and a prize crew put on board of her, while she was flying the British flag, to be immediately recaptured by her captain, with the assistance of his cook and steward.”

“Captain Tessier was also the first blockade-runner, for in command of the steamers “Bermuda” and “Bahama”, he carried successfully the first cargoes of cotton out of Charlestown and Savannah, realising through the ventures the astounding sum of £1,000,000, of which, unfortunately, his share eventually came to nothing, as the bonds with which he was paid proved worthless. Being a marked man by the Federal Government, he found it necessary during the continuance of the war to undergo twice a change of name to enable him the more effectually to serve his own Government.”

“On the conclusion of the war he came to Great Britain and reassumed his own name, under which he commenced business in Liverpool, where he became highly thought of for his knowledge of and skill in, wood ship construction and repairs. In a short time his fame reached the ears of the late Mr. Charles Bal, the founder of the Bureau Veritas International Registry of Shipping, who in 1867 invited him to become one of the leading shipping surveyors to that society, a position which he somewhat reluctantly accepted, as it appeared to him that his freedom of action would be fettered thereby.”

“However, after acceptance, he discharged the duties of the office with characteristic enthusiasm and energy, and with great acceptance and success at Liverpool until 1872, when he was transferred to Glasgow, the headquarters of the Bureau Veritas in Scotland. Here he resided until his death on Friday last, although he had resigned his position as surveyor about six years ago, after an active and continuous service in that capacity of about 28 years ; and when he retired the administration of the Bureau Veritas signified their high appreciation of his worth and abilities by a handsome gift of money, accompanied by other tangible tokens of their respect.”

“On his settling down permanently in this country Captain Tessier became a naturalised British subject and always took as great an interest in its affairs and wellbeing as if it had been his native land. By his natural practical talents, geniality, and courtesy, he soon made for himself a wide circle of friends wherever he went, and nowhere was this faculty more marked than in Glasgow, where many deplore his loss, and will long cherish his memory, and the deepest sympathy of numerous relatives and friends is felt for the widow and children who survive him.

“Throughout his business career Captain Tessier retained a lively interest in everything pertaining to ships and shipping, and connected himself financially with several eminent ship-owning firms in Liverpool and Glasgow, looking after and managing his affairs in this connection with skill and exactness, and with the methodical accuracy of an expert ledger clerk. To his friends, and they are many, he has left the sweet favour of an unblemished reputation for integrity in every walk of life, for honour, and old-fashioned courtesy.