



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— 19TH CENTURY —

Occasionem Cognosce

Francis Cabot Lowell

by Joel Wickwire

At the end of the 18th century, the British colonies in North America were largely an agrarian economy. Most critical manufactured goods were imported from Europe, traded for agricultural products. In the same period the Industrial Revolution in Europe was in full swing. Competition between countries' industries was keen. Intellectual property and trade secrets were targets for others. British laws forbid the export or transfer of manufacturing knowledge. One aim of the spies of the Industrial Revolution, like American Francis Cabot Lowell, was to improve their country's domestic production of manufactured goods, such as cotton.

In the early years of the American republic many leaders recognized that economic dependence on European manufacturing was a national weakness. The economic well-being of a young America was of great concern and the topic of much debate by the founding fathers. George Washington wrote to Thomas Jefferson on February 13, 1789 on the importance of the innovation of machinery:

Exclusive of these things, the greatest and most important objects of internal concern, which at present occupy the attention of the public mind, are manufactures and inland navigation. Many successful efforts in fabrics of different kinds are every day made... The encrease of that new material and the introduction of the late-improved Machines to abridge labour, must be of almost infinite consequence to America.¹

1. Washington, To Thomas Jefferson from George Washington, 13 February 1789, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-14-02-0308>.

The idea to look abroad for both individuals who had specialized knowledge of new technologies and obtaining this knowledge by other means was explored by Alexander Hamilton. In 1791, he wrote on the topic at length in a section of his *Report on Manufactures*, titled "The encouragement of New Inventions and Discoveries at Home and of the Introduction Into the United States of Such as May have Been Made in Other Countries, Particularly Those Which Relate to Machinery."²

The Embargo of 1807

Economic conditions worsened for the US during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) when hostilities between Britain and France restricted the US's access to trade routes across the Atlantic. In 1804, an author of the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison, wrote of this to James Monroe claiming Great Britain is searching and seizing all manners of cargo and persons.³ Tensions culminated in the "Chesapeake Affair" when the USS *Chesapeake* was shot upon and surrendered to the British, in clear violation of American sovereignty. Thomas Jefferson wrote Congress in 1806:

[T]hese Aggravations necessarily lead to the policy either of never admitting an armed vessel into our harbours, or of Maintaining in every Harbour such an armed force as may constrain Obedience to the laws, & protect the lives and property of our Citizens against their armed guests.⁴

Soon after this catalyzing event, Jefferson ordered British ships to retreat from American waters and the Embargo of 1807 began. John Page, in July of 1807, wrote to Jefferson that "an immediate Embargo is necessary...to retrieve our lost honor, & to bring the mad King to his senses..."⁵ Much controversy surrounded the Embargo, but in the end after being enacted in December of 1807, though it temporarily restricted economic activity by forbidding the exportation of

2. Hamilton, Alexander. *Report on Manufactures*. U.S. Congress, 1791, p. 42.

3. Madison to Monroe, February 5, 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison, Secretary of State Series*, ed. Mary A. Hackett et al. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 6:282-308. Transcription available at Founders Online. From: The Jefferson Monticello Library – https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/embargo-1807#footnote2_i6cogqb.

4. Jefferson to United States Congress, October 27, 1807, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the U.S. Senate. Transcription available at Founders Online. From: The Jefferson Monticello Library – https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/embargo-1807#footnote2_i6cogqb.

5. Page to Jefferson, July 12, 1807, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Transcription available at Founders Online. From: The Jefferson Monticello Library – https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/embargo-1807#footnote2_i6cogqb.

goods, it mitigated the threat of escalations that could draw the United States into the Franco-British war. There was, however, an increase in smuggling and other indirect means to promote economic development. One product that was impacted by this embargo was that of rum, produced in Francis Cabot Lowell's prospering rum distillery house.

Francis Cabot Lowell

Offering compensation for "improvements and secrets of extraordinary value" are amongst the incentives offered to those in a position to support economic growth among the States.⁶

Among the first to obtain intelligence of true industrial value for the US during this era of intense competition, and perhaps the most well-known, was Francis Cabot Lowell. Like another textile factory innovator, Samuel Slater (called "Slater the Traitor" in the United Kingdom), Francis Cabot Lowell was accredited with having an exceptional memory, which by-all-accounts was his primary method of intelligence collection and subsequent extraction. However, while Slater the Traitor was born in England, where he gained his specialized manufacturing knowledge as an apprentice from a young age, Lowell was born in the Boston and, by-all-means was behind enemy lines when he accomplished what today is considered an act of industrial espionage.

Francis Cabot Lowell's family motto was "Occasionem Cognosce" (Know the Opportunity), an apt motto for a family in a time of both the Industrial Revolution and the American Revolution. Francis Lowell's father, John Lowell II, was a Harvard Law School graduate along with a few of his soon-to-be compatriots, Presidents John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams, the latter of whom he rented an office from in Boston at his father's urging.⁷

John Lowell II, initially was a Loyalist, as were many, and remained faithful to King George longer than most. A business man and merchant, he and his wife, Susanna Cabot, daughter of a merchant, were respected members of Boston Society. John Collins Bossidy, a turn of the century poet, characterized the dynamics of this holy union in the following excerpt:

And this is good old Boston,
The home of the bean and the cod,

Where the Lowells talk only to the Cabots,
And the Cabots talk only to God.⁸

Francis Cabot Lowell, son of John and Susanna, was born April 7, 1775, twelve days before rebel patriot Paul Revere rode warning Samuel Adams and John Hancock, who were in Lexington near a store of arms, that the British were coming. The events of that night led to the first shots of the American Revolution. Notably, Lowell was also born just 22 days before the Battle at Bunker Hill.⁹

John Lowell II, would raise his son to be a merchant like himself, but it was a request from John Adams that shifted the family's alliance from King George to that of an independent America. On June 12, 1776, John Adams wrote to John Lowell regarding the sessions at Second Continental Congress:

You and I know very well the fatigues of practice at the bar, but I assure you this incessant round of thinking and speaking upon the greatest subjects that ever employed the mind of men, and the most perplexing difficulties that ever puzzled it, is beyond all comparison more exhausting and consuming. We have no resources left, my friend, but our own fortitude and favor of heaven.¹⁰

To which John Lowell II, replied:

...bound, in this Crisis, to afford my Country the little Assistance that I may be able to. I wish to see the Liberties of America fixed on a firm, immovable Basis, and to effect it I know they must be constructed on a broad and liberal Scale.¹¹

It could be said that with his family's shift in allegiances, Francis Cabot Lowell saw opportunity.

Francis Cabot Lowell had already become a successful shipping merchant. He shipped textiles, crops and foreign currency, which made him a small fortune. He had also invested in rum. In 1801, at the age of twenty-six, he bought a distill house located in West Boston. Lowell wrote of his success to his friend John Stille: "The price of rum has kept up beyond expectations owing to shipments to the North of Europe. We have not been able to make rum as fast as we have sold it."¹²

The Industrial Revolution in Europe was producing many innovations and, of course, improvements to the textile loom were highly sought after. Industry

6. Klein, Christopher. "The Spies Who Launched America's Industrial Revolution." *The History Channel*, 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/industrial-revolution-spies-europe>.

7. Rosenberg, Chaim. *The Life and Times of Francis Cabot Lowell*. Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2011, p. 25. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/life-and-times-of-francis-cabot-lowell-1775-1817/oclc/664114964/viewport>.

8. Rosenberg, p. 27.

9. Rosenberg, p. 23-7.

10. Rosenberg, p. 29.

11. Ibid.

12. Rosenberg, p. 93.

secrets, as they are today, were highly valued and coveted. Cautionary texts produced in England warned of would-be sellers of secrets trying to benefit in the new world. One such text, that sold for two shillings, was titled “Look Before You Leap – Or a few Hints to such Artisans, Merchants, Farmers, Labourers, and others, who are desirous of Emigrating to the Continent of America.” Here, the author describes those in search of information on new technologies with the purpose of fleeing as “agents hovering like birds of prey on the banks of the Thames, eager in their search for such artisans, mechanics, husbandmen and laborers, as are inclinable to direct their course to America.”¹³ Indeed, Francis Cabot Lowell was not any ordinary “bird of prey.” But he had a keen interest in textiles. By-all-accounts, he possessed a particularly keen mathematical mind and impressive memory. This was evident from his early days at Harvard where he tutored in mathematics and morals.¹⁴ He was, however, also described as being a “high-strung, delicate [man], prone to overwork and periods of nervous exhaustion.”¹⁵ It is suggested that this may be why in 1810 he planned a two-year trip to Scotland. The thought was that this time away might help to improve his health.

Two Years in Scotland

In the years after 1745, which marked the defeat of the Jacobite cause at Culloden, Scotland had “assumed the position of being in the forefront of European economic and social development” producing such great thinkers as Adam Smith and David Hume, not to mention innovations in the cotton textile industry.¹⁶ The capital of Scotland, Edinburgh, was a hub for the Lowell family for a large portion of its trip. Francis Cabot Lowell’s younger brother, Charles, had attended school there, and the family had friends in the city. The couple could venture out to the country on excursions. According to Robert Dalzell, Francis Lowell carried a four-page “memorandum [on] respecting the people in Edinburgh” that had been written by Charles for Francis.¹⁷ This would have enabled Francis Lowell to assimilate much.

On this trip Francis Cabot Lowell met with Nathan Appleton, a merchant, politician, member of the Boston Associates along with John Adams and

John Lowell, II. Appleton recalls the meet: “My connection with the Cotton Manufacturing takes date from year 1811, when I met my friend Mr. Francis C. Lowell, at Edinburgh, where he had been passing some time with his family.”¹⁸ Again, Lowell was no common “bird of prey.” Traveling in possession of “high-level Spanish doubloons and letters of introduction from important friends, such as former U.S. Secretary of State Timothy Pickering,” the Lowell family spent much of their leisure time amongst the higher echelons of British society.¹⁹ With this generous reception, came tours of the flourishing industrial sector of England. Francis Cabot Lowell took full advantage of this time and, knowing an opportunity when he saw one, studied the mills of Lancashire and Manchester with great curiosity and attention. Appleton wrote that Francis Cabot Lowell visited the mills “for the purpose of obtaining all possible information on the subject, with a view to the introduction of the improved manufacture in the United States.”²⁰

While Francis Cabot Lowell was provided official tours, in order spend the needed time required to gain intimate knowledge of the mills, he would also dress up as a farmer or peasant to draw less attention to his lingering about.²¹ In any case, in his apparent frail state, he seemed less the industrial spy committing what would become known as an act of industrial espionage, and more the sickly gentleman on holiday with his family.

Back to Boston and the Lowell Legacy

In 1812, after two years in England, at the onset of the War of 1812, tensions increased between the United States and Britain. It was time for the Lowell family to return home. However, upon arriving in Nova Scotia, the family was stopped and their entire boat was searched for evidence of notes and drawings of the mills and machinery that Francis Cabot Lowell had spent so much time studying. The British reportedly searched the ship and the family’s luggage several times. In the end, as the story goes, Francis Cabot Lowell had committed everything to memory.²²

Nathen Appleton wrote that the “power loom was at this time being introduced in England, but its

13. Rosenberg, p. 12.

14. Yaeger, Dan. “Brief life of an American entrepreneur: 1775-1817.” *Harvard Magazine*. 2010. <https://harvardmagazine.com/2010/09/vita-francis-cabot-lowell>.

15. Yaeger.

16. Dalzell, Robert F. *The Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 16.

17. Dalzell, p. 15.

18. Appleton, Nathan. *The Power Loom, Origin of Lowell*. B.H. Penhalow. 1858, p. 7. <https://archive.org/details/introductionofpooappl/page/n19/mode/2up/search/lowell>.

19. Yaeger.

20. Yaeger.

21. Green, Amy. “Francis Cabot Lowell and the Boston Manufacturing Company.” Charles River Museum. <https://www.charlesrivermuseum.org/francis-cabot-lowell-and-the-boston-manufacturing-company>.

22. Green.

construction was kept very secret...Mr. Lowell had obtained all the information which was practical about it, and was determined to perfect it himself.”²³

Francis Cabot Lowell helped found the Boston Manufacturing Company. Its development of the “Waltham-Lowell power loom system” brought great economic success to the Boston area. With the power loom so productive, the company sought greater waterpower and moved from the Charles River to the Merrimack River in East Chelmsford, which was later renamed the City of Lowell after Francis Cabot Lowell. This industrious enterprise was boasted as the first “planned factory town” in the United States and offered employment to young women whom at the time, rarely had the opportunity to earn regular wages, yet were eager and capable employees.²⁴ In the end, Francis Cabot Lowell achieved great success as a businessman and as an industrial spy, paying homage to his family motto: “Occasionem Cognosce” (Know the Opportunity). Francis Cabot Lowell died of pneumonia at the age of 42, only five years after returning to America — just enough time to see the completion of his first mill.

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23. Rosenberg, p. 8.

24. Green.

Intelligence Operations

“Luck affects everything.
Let your hook always be cast;
in the stream where you least expect it
there will be a fish.”

— Ovid