Congreſs of the United States.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

Wedneſday, January 19, 1803.

Debate on the report of the committee on ſo much of the preſident's meſſage as relates to navy yards and docks.

Mr. Mitchill moved that the houſe do now reſolve itſelf into a committee of the whole, to conſider the report of the ſelect committee, to whom had been referred that part of the preſident's meſſage which relates to improvements on navy yards, and the conſtruction of a dry dock at the city of Waſhington.

The motion after a ſhort converſation was agreed to, and Mr. J. C. Smith took the chair.

The firſt reſolution was read in the following words:—

Reſolved, That for ſecuring from waſte and loſs the timber and other public property on the different navy yards, and towards improving the ſame for the greater diſpatch of buſineſs, the ſecretary of the navy, under the direction of the preſident of the United States, ſhall cauſe the requiſite buildings and ſheds to be erected, and other needful repairs and improvements to be made; and that for accompliſhing the ſame dollars are hereby appropriated, to be paid out of any monies in the treaſury not otherwiſe appropriated.

Mr. Mitchill obſerved, that there would be no need of much argument to covince the committee of the propriety of adopting the propoſition before them. There were ſix navy yards belonging to the nation. There was a quantity of timber and materials for naval preparations on each of them. Theſe had been purchaſed at great expence, and depoſited for future uſe. By virtue of exiſting contracts, more timber, particularly that for building the ſix 74's was expected. When collected and delivered at the ſeveral places of deſtination, it ought to be preſerved with the greateſt care. This timber was of the moſt precious kind. Much of it was like oak from the ſouthern ſtates. The quantity and value of it in the yards at New-York, Portſmouth, Norfolk, Charleſton, Philadelphia and Waſhington, could be ſeen in the reports of the ſecretary of the navy. Many of the pieces for keels, ſtems and ſtern-poſts, were very ſelected and difficult to be procured. That invaluable timber was growing ſcarce. In the progreſs of cultivation and the arts, a large number of them had been extirpated, and according to the preſent proſpects, a time would before long arrive when ſuch materials as we now poſſeſs, and which are bought and paid for, could not be got for money. Some of theſe naval articles had already been damaged for want of a ſeaſonable appropriation for their better protection from the weather. The ſhining of the ſun and the beating of the ſtorms were both injurious to it, and unleſs their influence was precluded, they would ſoon render it unfit for the conſtruction of ſhips. To preſerve this timber from the unavoidable decay, which awaited it, he hoped a moderate ſum of money might be ſpared from the treaſury. The erection of ſome ſheds, covers and buildings fit to ſhelter theſe periſhable things, would not require a large amount. This was one of the caſes in which the expenditure of a ſmall number of dollars would be productive of great and laſting good. To refuſe it, would reſemble the miſtaken economy of the man who, after having built a magnificent houſe, could not perſuade himſelf to buy a lock for the ſtreet door. Mr. M. ſaid he would call the attention of the committee to another ſubject ſtrictly connected with the one he had juſt mentioned. Beſides the buildings contemplated, he thought there ought to be an allowance of ſome money towards repairs and improvements of ſuch of the navy yards as the officer at the head of that department ſhould find it moſt convenient to employ. A ſmall ſum to be expended in levelling ground, in docking out, in erecting cranes, and the like, will greatly contribute to the diſpatch of the public buſineſs. He could mention a caſe to evince the good economy of ſuch an appropriation as he aſked for. On the navy-yard at New-York, one of the fineſt and moſt ſelect ſpots on the coaſt of the Atlantic, ſome ſtore houſes had been begun and were unfiniſhed, and conſequently uſeleſs. The agent, deprived of the means of finiſhing them, was obliged to pay a conſiderable ſum yearly for ſtorage in the city of New-York. He believed that an expenditure there, equal to one or two years rent, which the nation muſt unavoidably pay, would finiſh theſe magazines and naval depoſitories, and ſave the further neceſſity of paying an extravagant rent. The receiving, overhauling, repairing, and equipping of ſhips, ordered to that great naval rendezvous, would be promoted, and the public ſervice ſingularly aided by it. Mr. Mitchell concluded by moving that the blank in the reſolution ſhould be filled up with the words "fifty thouſand dollars."

Carried, without a diviſion.

The ſecond reſolution was then read in the following words.

Reſolved, That for preventing rottenneſs and decay in the ſhips of the navy, the preſident of the United States be, and hereby is authoriſed, to cauſe a dry dock, with convenient canals, locks, machinery, and water courſes, to be conſtructed at or near the public navy yard in the city of Waſhington; which dock ſhall be capable of containing twelve frigates, or ſhips of war, and of preſerving them dry and ſafely ſheltered from ſun-ſhine and rain; and that for carrying the ſame into effect dollars be, and the ſame hereby are appropriated, to be paid out of any monies in the treaſury not otherwiſe appropriated.

Mr. Mitchill roſe, and after obſerving that the blank in the reſolution required filling up with the words "half a million of dollars," a ſum larger perhaps than could be ſpared at this time from the treaſury, charged with the redemption of the public debt, moved that the committee riſe.

Mr. Rutledge expreſſed a deſire that the committee, previous to riſing, ſhould progreſs in the conſideration of the report, that gentlemen who were prepared might offer their ſentiments.

Mr. Mitchill again roſe, and informed the committee, that his motion for the committee to riſe did not proceed from any diſinclination to diſcuſs the merits of the propoſition now before them. And to convince the gentleman of his ſincerity in this he withdrew the motion for riſing. The hiſtory of this project was already very well underſtood. And the documents printed and exhibited for the information of congreſs, had been, almoſt ever ſince the ſeſſion commenced, before the eyes of the members. The contemplated public work was predicated on a paragraph of the preſident's meſſage at the opening of the ſeſſion. To elucidate the matters, beautiful and appropriate drawings of the docks and its locks had been laid before the houſe. Surveys and eſtimates had been made by engineers and geometricians, and theſe had been forwarded for congreſſional inſtruction. Coming before the ſelect committee who reported the reſolution, the recommendation was ſo highly reſpectable, and the project ſo plauſible, that there was an unanimous vote in its favor. For his own part, Mr. M. ſaid he was willing to admit the project a feaſible one, and for the preſent he ſhould not diſpute it. The warfare with Tripoli was now upon our hands; and we might have other wars. The preſervation of the ſhips of the navy was a great public object. The common mode adopted by nations, he believed, was to expend a conſiderable ſum of money annually in repairs. Ships could be hove down, or taken into dry docks, and undergo all manner of ſearching, caulking, coppering and repairs. In the ordinary mode of taking ſhips in ſucceſſively, one dock, capable of containing one ſhip, would anſwer for a great number; and each veſſel, after being dried, cleared and overhauled, could be launched again into her element. The preſent project was ſomewhat different. It meditated a dry dock, or receptacle, in which twelve large ſhips could be laid up at once. He did not know how far experience had warranted ſuch an experiment. But he had been told of ſomething of the ſame kind done in Sweden; and it had been ſaid that Venice had an eſtabliſhment of a like nature. But the details of information concerning them were far from being ſo ample and correct as would render them precedents in the preſent inſtance. If the object could be accompliſhed, the advance of the ſum required for the work, would put the navy in ſuch a ſtate of preſervation, that ſhips ſheltered within the dry dock would remain a great length of time, uninjured by common accidents. With regard to *new* ſhips, not lauched nor wetted in ſervice, there could be no doubt they might be ſo covered and protected as to keep as well as furniture in a houſe. While dry and ſhaded, there was no queſtion of its ability to remain ſound and unchanged. But it was different with ſhips that had grown foul and water ſoaked in the ocean. It was very queſtionable whether the dampneſs acquired could ever be ſo thoroughly dried out as to prevent putrefaction. The water imbibed would not eaſily quit the planks and timbers, covered as they were with ſheathing, copper, and ballaſt.—Enough moiſture would, he feared, remain there to continue the proceſs of corruption and decay in the wooden work. Such a maſs of timber, ſoaked through & through would perhaps fall to pieces the faſter for being kept a long time out of water. The receptacle would probably be damp, and ventilation imperfect. Septic vapors with moiſture would exert their diſorganizing powers. The *atmoſpheric heat* being greater than the temperature of *river water*, would accelerate the rotting in ſummer. And the expanſive power of *ice* formed from the imbibed and confined water, might be expected to do no ſmall miſchief in winter. When a ſhip was under water her temperature was more equal, neither ſo hot in ſummer, nor cold in winter, as bodies above water; and conſequently leſs expoſed to the cauſes of decay.

He ſhould not however proceed any further at preſent on this copious ſubject; but ſuſpended further remarks until he ſhould hear from the gentlemen who had turned their attention to the project, how this novel and economical propoſition preſented itſelf to their underſtandings, and whether they felt any doubts like thoſe which occupied his own.

Mr. Euſtis. Whether the motion for the committee's riſing be perſiſted in or withdrawn, we find the reſult to be the ſame. Gentlemen will go into the conſideration of the merits of the reſolution—and as the whole ſubject is before us, an interchange of ideas may be uſeful in forming our judgment and leading to a deciſion.

Every propoſal which has for its object the protection or preſervation of the navy was intereſting to the Atlantic ſtates, and peculiarly ſo to the diſtrict he had the honor to repreſent. To that which was under conſideration ſeveral objections had occurred to his mind, ſome of which inſtead of being removed, were confirmed by the obſervations of the chairman of the committee who had reported the reſolution. A fact ſtated by the engineer was within the knowledge of perhaps every gentleman; that the bed of the river called the Eaſtern Branch (where it is propoſed to erect the works) conſiſts of a looſe and ſhifting earth, which renders it uncertain to what depth it will be neceſſary to go for a foundation for the ſtone wall which is to form the front of the firſt lock; the elevation and breadth or thickneſs of the wall cannot therefore be aſcertained, nor the expence which will be incurred in its ſtructure. But admitting that a foundation can be had at a reaſonable depth, and that there is no danger that this looſe ſoil will be waſhed into and impede the operations of the firſt lock; let us imagine the locks and dock completed, according to the plan and at the eſtimated expence, the ſhips hauled into the dry dock, and the water of the Tbier ſufficient at all ſeaſons of the year to fill the dry dock and to float them back into the river. We then meet the queſtion, whether the great object of the work, the *preſervation of the ſhips* will be effected. It is propoſed to ſupport them by blocks or props. Is there not danger that heavy ſhips reſting for a long time on comparatively ſmall reſting points, will be racked and injured in their frames? And will they be preſerved from decay? As part of the dock will probably be ſunk beneath the ſurface of the ground, and as the walls are to be conſtructed of ſolid maſonry and made water proof, he was very much inclined to the opinion of the gentleman from New-York, that it would be extremely difficult to ventilate it effectually; that there muſt be a moiſture unfavorable to the preſervation of wood, iron and copper. On the other hand, ſhould it be found practicable to ventilate perfectly, and to render the air within the arſenal as dry as the external atmoſphere, was there not reaſon to apprehend the ſame conſequences which we have obſerved in boats and ſmall veſſels which are hauled out of the water, and placed under cover from the ſun. By the ſhrinking of the wood will not the copper fall off, and the expence of new coppering be incurred when they are taken out for uſe? The ſucceſs of the experiment was uncertain. It was not known to him that any of the European nations had adopted this plan. They had incurred immenſe expence in building, and it was to be preſumed they had fallen on the beſt means of preſerving their ſhips. In works of ſuch magnitude he thought it more prudent to follow, than to lead the practice of older and more experienced nations. It was ſtated in the report, on the authority of a very reſpectable naval officer, that an experiment of this kind was making in Sweden by the recommendation of one of their admirals; but it was worthy of obſervation that they were making the experiment in deep water, and on the ſide of a rock; and that the firſt, if not all their docks were to be tide docks; the advantages of making locks in places where the tide roſe eight or ten feet, in preference to thoſe where it roſe only four or five (as in this river) muſt be obvious. The preſent ſtate of our navy required, he apprehended, the conſtruction of tide docks in one or two of the navy yards where the water was deep, and the ſituation otherwiſe eligible. One of the frigates requires coppering at this time; others will require repairs; which cannot well be effected without ſuch a proviſion. He further doubted the expediency of erecting at this time ſo large an arſenal in this place; he ſhould prefer that the ſhips ſhould be moored not all in any one place, but nearer to the ocean, and to the populous towns which abounded with ſeaman and artizans of different kinds.

The engineer had further ſtated that the dry docks might alſo be uſed as a building place; and there could be no doubt it would afford a moſt commodious one. But he doubted whether it was juſtifiable to provide an arſenal for building on ſo extenſive a plan at this time and with the preſent population of this city.

Whether ſhips were to be built or repaired, he believed the work would be carried on with greater advantages and diſpatch in the neighborhood of large ſea-port towns, which afforded a choice and a competition of workmen.

In the preſent ſtate of the navy, and conſidering the great extent of our coaſt, he could not think it adviſable to conſtruct an arſenal on ſo large a ſcale at any one place, and eſpecially at a diſtance of nearly 300 miles from the ocean. He ſhould prefer a diſtribution of them in ſome of the navy yards nearer the ſea-board, and in the vicinity of populous towns containing materials and artizans for building and repairing. At ſome of theſe places tide-docks might be conſtructed without a very great expence. He had been informed that at one of the yards a dock might be made for 10,000 dollars; but he could not be anſwerable for the correctneſs of the ſtatement. A proviſion of this kind was called for. The ſervice actually required it. Ships returning from long voyages wanted repairs. One of the ſhips which has been repaired at a great expence, ought to be coppered immediately. And it is ſaid it will be cheaper to ſend her to Europe, than to have it done in this country. The want of ſuitable docks and wharves is among the reaſons.

Whether it be owing to ſome error in the mode of conſtruction, or to whatever other cauſe, our ſhips of war have decayed in leſs than half the time than thoſe of other nations. Some of them were, he was apprehenſive, in ſuch a ſtate that no cover could preſerve them.

Theſe were the obſervations which had occurred to him on the ſubject. He would wait for thoſe of other gentlemen after adding, that it was with reluctance he ſtated ſome of the objections which applied particularly to this place, as the expreſſion of ſimilar ideas had been conſtrued into a diſpoſition unfriendly to it. With every inclination to foſter the intereſts of the city, he was apprehenſive this was not a meaſure calculated to produce that effect. Should the work be completed at the eſtimated expence of dollars, and fail, from any of the cauſes which have been glanced at, to anſwer the public expectation, or the uſeful objects on which it is founded, will not the neceſſary conſequence be a diſcouragement to future enterprizes, and to retard inſtead of promoting its growth and population?

Mr. S. Smith ſaid he would not object to the committee riſing, as he was not himſelf fully prepared to decide on the ſubject. He would, however, make a few remarks on what had been obſerved by the gentleman from Maſſachuſetts, (Mr. Euſtis.)—It is true that the bottom of the Eaſtern Branch is generally a deep mud. But the engineer had reported a ſpot adjoining the navy yard, as the place moſt proper for the docks; where, fortunately, there was a gravel bottom, ſufficiently ſolid for the conſtruction of the firſt lock: the ſecond would be on ſolid ground, as deſignated on the drawing.—He had no doubt but that the lock could be made. The ſecond would form a good dock for building or repairing ſhips of war. Reſpecting the arſenal, he confeſſed himſelf at a loſs to form a correct opinion. He did not, however, believe that there would be any more danger of the ſhips hogging when lowered down, by drawing off the water, on their blocks, than when on the ſtocks. Experience has ſhewn that ſhips repaired in dry docks are ſubjected to a ſimilar riſque, and yet few accidents happen in thoſe docks. Whether ſhips put into ſuch an arſenal could be ſo completely ventilated as to dry the floor timbers of ſhips that had been any time in the water, was an experiment yet to be made. He knew of no experience from which a judgment could be formed. He had ſeen at Venice above twenty ſhips of war in the arſenal, completely under cover, each lying afloat in its own dock, with ſtores on each ſide, in which their materials were depoſited—He was told that the whole number could be put to ſea in twenty or thirty days notice—He did not believe that a dock one foot above the tide, on dry gravelly ground, and of a ſize to contain twelve ſhips, when covered over, would be a place ſo damp that nothing would dry. He believed that if the garbord ſtreaks of each ſhip were taken off, and ſtreaks taken off their ceiling at proper intervals, that a current of dry air would be introduced ſufficient to keep the ſhips ſweet—experience only could ſhew whether there would be enough to dry the timbers completely; for himſelf he doubted As to the quantity of water in the Tiber being inſufficient, that objection was done away by the reſervoirs contemplated. He had ſo great a reſpect for the engineer, that he did not believe he would commence a plan of this importance unleſs he was certain of ſucceſs. He would not commit his character without every probability of ſucceeding. Mr. S. ſaid he knew the ſpot, and believed that nature had ſeldom pointed out one more proper than that contemplated. The Eaſtern Branch was central, the water deep, and being ſo freſh as to furniſh ſhips for their voyage; could never be affected by the worm—the diſtance from the ſea makes it ſafe againſt any immediate or ſudden ſtroke of an enemy; of courſe peculiarly proper for building ſhips of war. The Potomak and other waters of the Cheſapeake, offer great ſupplies of the beſt of oak, walnut, locuſt and mulberry. The maſts got in the neighborhood of Norfolk, are inferior to none. Suſquehanna offers an inexhauſtible ſtore of pine for maſts and ſpars. There, and there only, could be procured the maſts for Algiers—North-Carolina is in its vicinity to ſupply naval ſtores, and on the Potomak mines of the beſt iron ore are known, and worked. He believed it a fact admitted, that the oak of Cheſapeake, and particularly of Eaſt and North rivers of Virginia, laſted in ſhips nearly double the time that the oak of the Eaſtern ſhips did. He believed that the induſtry of our Eaſtern brethren had nearly exhauſted their beſt timber; for if he had been rightly informed, the keel of the Conſtitution, built in Boſton, was brought from Jerſey. The gentleman will admit all this, but he aſks where are the men? They are to be had on an exigency no where but in large towns. Wherever, ſaid Mr. S. there is plenty of work, and plenty of money to pay, there men will go: they will be brought from the Eaſtern ſtates, and from the rivers of Cheſapeake; commence building, give employment, and men will not be wanting. The queſtion is, whether it is cheaper to bring the men to the ſpot where all the materials are, or to carry the materials to the men. But the water of the Potomak is not ſufficiently deep for ſhips of war. It was deeper he believed than the Delaware, and as deep as the entrance to New-York, he was informed that the ſhip Conſtellation touched going out of that port. It was true that it was deemed prudent to lighten the large frigates, when they came up the Potomak, but it is believed that thoſe of 22 feet draft would have been in no danger, had they come up without. It is true that the navigation of this river is ſometimes tedious, but never dangerous; that of the Cheſapeake is inferior to no inland navigation that he knew. The intention of erecting dry docks was not confined to this place alone, he had underſtood that at the navy yard, near Boſton, a convenient ſpot offered itſelf, and that docks built there might be filled from the Middleſex canal. It was contemplated to make the experiment under the eye of government, and if ſucceſsful here to extend it to Boſton; for his part, Mr. S. ſaid, he would willingly give his conſent to building docks at Boſton, when brought forward at a proper time.

Mr. S. agreed that more convenience for building and repairing of ſhips offered in large and populous cities; yet ſome of our beſt ſhips for merchant ſervice, are built in ſmall towns, and indeed where there was no town; he alluded to the ſhip builders in Eaſt and North rivers in Virginia, and excellent builders on the E. ſhore of the Cheſapeake. Expedition will always be good under the eye of the maſter, even when the means appear fewer. Some experience has been had by government. Has any of the ſhips, he aſked, ordered for the Mediterranean from Boſton, New-York, Philadelphia, or Norfolk, been put to ſea in the time that the ſhips New-York and John Adams were diſpatched from this city? he believed the former was ready in fifteen days, the latter in 21 days, and he might ſay that not one of thoſe from large ports, were diſpatched in leſs than ſix or eight weeks. The truth was that men could be brought from the large towns in the union to man them, while the ſhips were rigging.

Mr. S. Said he had made thoſe few haſty obſervations in anſwer to the gentleman (Mr. Euſtis), but he believed, it would be improper to preſs gentlemen at this ſeſſion into a deciſion on a ſubject of ſuch importance; he believed alſo that it would be prudent at this time to make no appropriation of money that could be avoided. A peaceful object ſuch as the arſenal for the preſervation of our ſhips might be poſtponed until another ſeſſion, when more information may probably be had, and when we ſhall better know whether we can ſpare the money from objects that may be more important.

Thurſday, January 20, 1803.

Reſolved, That a committee be appointed to enquire whether any, and if any, what alterations are neceſſary in the law, entitled "An act to amend the judicial ſyſtem of the United States;" and to report thereon by bill or otherwiſe.

Meſſrs. Brent, Perkins and Jones were appointed the committee.

Mr. Brent, from the committee appointed on the 21ſt ult. on the petition of ſundry inhabitants of Alexandria, made a report which was agreed to as follows: and Meſſrs. Brent, Van Horne and Tallmage appointed a committee to bring in a bill.

Reſolved, That whenſoever the legiſlature of Virginia ſhall paſs a law authoriſing the incorporated ſociety of that ſtate, known by the name of "the Mutual Inſurance Society on buildings in Virginia againſt accidents by fire," to extend their inſurances on buildings in the county of Alexandria, agreeable to the ſame laws, rules and regulations by which the ſaid ſociety is governed in their inſurances in that ſtate, from thenceforth it ſhall be lawful for the ſaid ſociety to have the ſame right and mode of recovering in the courts of the county of Alexandria againſt any inhabitant thereof, ſo enſuring with the ſaid ſociety his building in the ſaid county againſt accidents by fire, which might be had againſt him, if the perſon ſo enſuring, was a citizen, and the buildings ſo inſured ſituated in the ſtate of Virginia.

The houſe again reſolved itſelf into a committee of the whole, Mr. John C. Smith in the chair—on the report of the committee to whom was referred ſo much of the preſident's meſſage as relates to navy yards and the building of the docks.

After a conſideration of the ſame, the committee roſe, and reported that they had agreed to the firſt reſolution, as ſtated in our laſt, and had made further progreſs in the ſecond reſolution.

The houſe proceeded to conſider the report, agreed to the firſt reſolution, and appointed Meſſrs. Mitchill, Rutledge, Hanna, Wadſworth and Mott a committee to bring in a bill purſuant thereto.

On the queſtion whether the committee ſhould have leave to ſit again on the ſecond reſolution, it paſſed in the negative.

On which the following motion was made and agreed to.

Reſolved, That a committee conſiſting of Meſſrs. Mitchill, Rutledge, Hanna, Wadſworth and Mott, be appointed to enquire into the uſefulneſs and propriety of conſtructing a dock or docks at either of the public navy yards, or elſewhere within the United States, for the building and repair of ſhips of war.

Friday, January 21, 1803.

An engroſſed bill for incorporating an inſurance company in the city of Waſhington, was read a third time, and paſſed—Ayes 32—Noes 28.

An engroſſed bill for the relief of Hugh Alexander, was read a third time, and paſſed.

The houſe went into committee of the whole on the bill amendatory of the act to incorporate the city of Waſhington—Mr. J. C. Smith in the chair.

Several amendments were made; when the committee roſe and reported the bill, which was poſtponed till Monday next.

On motion of Mr. Dennis the houſe took into conſideration a reſolution, laid ſome time ſince on the table, for the appointment of a committee to enquire into the expediency of continuing the mint at Philadelphia, and to enquire what alterations or improvements can be made in that eſtabliſhment.

Mr. Dennis obſerved that the preſent law would expire on the third day of March next. It was time, therefore, to take order on the ſubject. He thought the enquiry propoſed by the reſolution a very proper one. If the reſult of ſuch enquiry were that important improvements could be made, he ſhould vote for the continuance of the inſtitution; if otherwiſe, he ſhould vote for its entire abolition.