DORCHESTER AURORA.

"PRINCIPLES AND MEASURES, AND MEN BY THESE PRINCIPLES."

VOL. 2. CAMBRIDGE, MD.—MONDAY, MAY 1, 1837. NO. 43.

DORCHESTER AURORA,

EDITED AND PRINTED BY

WM. H. BARROW.

TERMS—$2 50 a year, one-half to be paid upon the receipt of the first number. Subscribers may discontinue the paper at any time by paying for the time they have received it; but not without, except with the assent of the Editor.

Advertisements not exceeding a square, inserted three times for $1 00; each after insertion 25 cents—when larger, in proportion.

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TAX ON SALT.

SPEECH OF MR. BENTON,

OF MISSOURI,

In Senate, Tuesday, May 11th, 1830.

Mr. BENTON commenced his speech by saying that he was no advocate for unprofitable debate, and had no ambition to add his name to the catalogue of unproductive orators; but there were cases in which speaking did good—cases in which moderate abilities produced results—and he believed the question of repealing the salt tax to be one of those cases. It had certainly been so in England. There the salt tax had been overthrown by the labors of plain men, and overthrown under circumstances much less favorable to their undertaking than exist here.—The English salt tax had continued one hundred and fifty years. It was cherished by the ministry, to whom it yielded a million and a half sterling of revenue; it was defended by the domestic salt makers, to whom it gave a monopoly of the home market; it was consecrated by time, having subsisted for five generations: it was fortified by the habits of the people, who were born and had grown gray under it, and it was sanctioned by the necessities of the State, which demanded every resource of rigorous taxation. Yet it was overthrown; and the overthrow was effected by two debates, conducted, not by the orators whose renown has filled the world,—not by Fox, Sheridan, Pitt, and Burke,—but by plain, practical, business men; by Mr. Calcraft, Mr. Curwen, and Mr. Egerton. These useful and patriotic members of the British Parliament commenced the war upon the British salt tax in 1817, and finished it in 1822. They commenced with the omens and auspices all against them, and they ended with the results all in their favor. They abolished the tax *in toto*.—They swept it all off. They bravely rejected all compromises, insidiously offered by their adversaries when half vanquished; and, redoubling their blows, and carrying their appeals home to the people, they stood to the contest until they had roused a spirit before which the ministry quailed—the monopolizers trembled—the Parliament gave way—and the tax fell. This example is encouraging. It is full of consolation and of hope. It shows what courage, zeal, and perseverance can do in a good cause. It shows that the cause of truth and justice is triumphant when its advocates are bold, faithful, and determined. It sets an example worthy to be followed in this country, where the objections to the repeal are so much weaker than in England,—where this tax is not wanted for revenue,—answers no purpose for protection,—imposes an enormous burthen upon the people,—and is kept up in defiance of the cessation of all the reasons for its imposition; for it was imposed as a war tax, during the late hostilities with Great Britain, and should have been repealed as soon as that war was over. The success of Mr. Calcraft and his friends inspires confidence, and leads to the conviction that the American salt tax will fall, as the British salt tax did, as soon as the people shall see that its continuance is a grievous injury to them, without adequate advantage to the Government, and its repeal and suppression is in their own hands.

The enormous amount of the tax was the first point to which Mr. B. would direct his attention. It was a tax of three hundred per cent. upon Liverpool, and four hundred per cent upon Turks Island and St Ubes salt; but as the Liverpool was a very inferior salt, and not much used in the West, he would confine his remarks to the salt of Portugal, the Mediterranean sea, and the West Indies, made by solar evaporation, and called by the general name of alum. The import price of this salt was from three to nine cents a bushel; and the duty, upon the custom-house bushel of fifty-six pounds, was twenty cents. Here was a tax of many hundred per cent. to the Government. Then the merchant had his profit upon the duty, as well as upon the cost of the article; and, after that, came a loss of thirty-four pounds in the bushel by the contrivance, borrowed from England, of substituting weight for measure in ascertaining the bushel, and that weight a false one. A measured bushel of alum salt weighs eighty-four pounds; but the British tariff laws, for the sake of multiplying the bushels, and increasing the product of the tax, substituted weight, and erroneous weight, for true measure; and our tariff laws copied after them, and adopted their standard of fifty-six pounds for a bushel.

[Here Gen. Smith of Maryland, rose, and said he had misled the Senator from Missouri in telling him, some days ago, that the weight of a bushel of alum salt was eighty-four pounds; he had told him so, but subsequent reflection had satisfied him that it was below eighty.]

Mr. B. resumed his speech. He said the Senator from Maryland was not so far wrong in his first information as he supposed; that he (Mr. B.) was informed, from other sources, that Turk's Island salt weighed above eighty pounds to the bushel; and he had a report before him, made by a committee of the British House of Commons, of which Mr. Calcraft was chairman, in which it is stated that the best Bay of Biscay salt weighs fully eighty-four pounds. But, let us assume the weight at eighty, and even at this estimate there is a loss of thirty pounds in the bushel to the consumer; for the retail merchant, and the manufacturer, taking the hint from the tariff bushel, and improving upon it, also substitute weight for measure, and further reduce the weight from fifty-six to fifty pounds. This is a loss of three parts in eight—very nearly one half—reducing the bushel to about two pecks and a half—and nearly doubling the actual cost of the article. Putting all this together—the duty—the merchant's profit upon the duty—and the diminution of the bushel—and the tax on alum salt is shown to be four or five hundred per cent.! in other words, the tax is four or five times the value of the article, and quadruples, or quintuples, the cost to the consumer! This a grievous oppression upon the people; an oppression which they ought not to bear without a dire necessity, and for the present bearing of which there is no necessity at all.

Mr. B. entered into statistical details to show the aggregate amount of this tax, viewed in all its bearings—duty, merchant's profit loss in the bushel—and showed it to amount to about two millions and a quarter of dollars, upon an article costing about three quarters of a million of dollars, and that article one of prime necessity and universal use, ranking next after bread in the catalogue of the absolute necessaries of life! Great as this tax was, it was but a trifle compared to the injury done to the stock of the country for want of the salt which the tax prevented them from receiving.

The distribution of this enormous tax, and its vast injuries, upon the different sections of the Union, was the next object of Mr. B's inquiry; and, for this purpose, he viewed the Union under its several divisions—the North east—the Middle States—the South—and the West;—and in its unequal bearing upon these different sections, he found new arguments in favor of the abolition of the tax. It operated very unequally upon the different parts of the Union. To the northeast, and especially to some parts of the northeast, this tax was no burthen at all, but rather a profitable concern, and, in fact, a money making business. The fishing bounties and allowances produce this effect. In consideration of the salt duty, the curers and exporters of fish are allowed money out of the Treasury, in the nature of a drawback, to the amount, as it was intended to be, of the salt duty paid by them; but it has been proved to be twice as much. The annual allowance is about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars; and the aggregate drawn from the Treasury since the first imposition of the salt duty in 1789, is shown by the Treasury returns to be about five millions of dollars. Much of this is drawn by undue means, as is shown by the report of the Secretary of the Treasury, Mr. Ingham, at the commencement of the present session of Congress. Above fifty thousand dollars of frauds in these bounties and allowances were detected at the Treasury in the course of the last year, and payment stopped, or the amount paid reclaimed.—See page 8 of the annual report upon the finances. Besides, the northeast makes much salt at home, and chiefly by solar evaporation, which fits it for curing fish and other provisions. Much of this home made salt is proved by the returns of the salt makers to be used in the fisheries; while these fisheries are drawing money from the Treasury under the laws made to indemnify them for the duty paid on the foreign salt re-exported on the fish cured by it. To this section of the Union, then, the salt tax is no burthen.

Let us proceed then to the middle and southern Atlantic States. In those sections there are but few salt works, and no bounties and allowances, even to the fisheries in the Chesapeake and other bays. The consumers in these sections are thrown almost entirely upon the foreign supply, and chiefly use the Liverpool blown. The import price of this is about fifteen cents a bushel; the weight and strength is less than that of alum salt, and the tax falls heavily and directly upon the people. It is an unmitigated tax to them—a heavy burden—and is felt by every farmer, in the heavy price which he pays, and in the diminished quantity which he uses.—To the middle and southern States, this tax is a real injury.

The West is the last section to be viewed, and this great region will be found to be the true seat of the most oppressive operation of this tax. The domestic supply is high in price—deficient in quantity—still more in quality—and altogether unfit for one of the greatest purposes for which salt is there wanted—that of curing provisions for exportation. A foreign supply is indispensable, and alum salt is the kind required. The import price of this kind, from the West Indies, is about nine cents a bushel; from Spain and Portugal, seven or eight; and from the coasts and islands of the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas, three, four, and five cents. At these prices the great West could be supplied with this salt at New Orleans, if the duty was abolished; for it comes in ballast, and would be sold at cost; but, in consequence of the duty, it costs thirty or forty cents a bushel at that place, and seventy five cents or a dollar at Louisville, St. Louis, and other central and upper parts of the valley of the Mississippi. It thus appears, that the salt tax falls heaviest upon the West, as the tax is levied upon the quantity and not upon the cost—is a specific and not an ad valorem duty—and exacts as much from that which cost five cents, as upon that which costs fifteen. It is an error to suppose, that the South is the greatest sufferer from this tax. The West needs it for every purpose in common with the South, and for two great purposes in a much higher degree—salting stock, and curing provisions for exportation. The west uses alum salt, and on this the duty is heaviest, because the cost is lower and the weight is greater than that of Liverpool. Like the South, and the middle atlantic States, the West receives no bounties or allowances on account of the salt duties. This may be fair in the South, where the imported salt is not re exported upon fish or provisions; but it is unfair in the West, where the exportation of beef, pork, bacon, cheese, and butter, is prodigious, and the foreign salt re-exported upon the whole of it.

Mr. B. then argued, with great earnestness, that the provision curers and exporters were equitably entitled to the same bounties and allowances which were granted to the curers and exporters of fish. The claims of each rested on the same principle, and on the principle of all drawbacks, that of a reimbursement of the amount of duty paid on the imported salt which was re-exported on fish provisions. The same principle covers the beef and pork of the farmer which covers the fish of the fisherman; and such was the law in the beginning. The first act of Congress, in the year 1879, which imposed a duty upon salt, allowed a bounty in lieu of drawback, on beef and pork cured with foreign salt, and exported, as well as on fish. The bounty was the same in each case; it was five cents a quintal on dried fish, five cents a barrel on pickled fish, and five cents a barrel on beef and pork. The duty on salt was then five cents a bushel; and as the duty increased, the bounties and allowances increased also. Fish, beef, and pork fared alike for the first twenty years of Federal legislation on this subject.—They fared alike until the revival of the salt tax at the commencement of the late war with Great Britian. Then they parted company. Bounties and allowances were continued on fish, and dropped on beef and pork; and this has been the case ever since. The fishermen are now drawing at the rate of $250,000 per annum as a reimbursement of their salt tax; while the provision-curers draw nothing. The aggregate of the fishing bounties and allowances actually drawn from the Treasury, exceeds five millions of dollars; while the exporters of provisions, who get nothing, would have been entitled to draw a larger sum; for the exports in salted provisions exceeds the value of exported fish.

Mr. B. could not quit this part of his subject without endeavoring to fix the attention of the Senate upon the provision trade of the great West. He took this trade in its largest sense, as including the foreign export of beef, pork, bacon, cheese, and butter, to different countries, and especially to the West Indies; the domestic export to the Lower Mississippi and the Southern States; the neighborhood trade, as supplying the towns in the upper States—the miners in Missouri and on the Upper Mississippi—the army and navy,—and the various professions, which, being otherwise employed, did not produce their own provisions. The amount of this trade, in this comprehensive view, was prodigious, and annually increasing, and involving in its current almost the entire population of the West, either in the growers and makers of the provisions, or as the curers, purchasers, and exporters. The amount could scarcely be ascertained. What was exported from New Orleans was seen to be great; but it was only a fraction of the whole. He declared this trade to be entitled to the favorable consideration of Congress, and expressed the belief that the repeal of the salt tax would be the greatest favor—if an act of justice could be called a favor—which could be rendered to this great interest, as the salt tax was necessary in growing the hogs and cattle, as well as in preparing the beef and pork for market. A reduction in the price of salt, next to a reduction in the price of refuse land, was the greatest blessing which the Federal Government could now confer upon the West, and one for which the voice of the Great Valley should be united, emphatic, vehement, and incessant.

Mr. B. referred to the example of England, who favored her provision curers, and permitted them to import alum salt free of duty, for the encouragement of the provision trade, even when her own salt manufacturers were producing an abundant and superfluous supply of common salt, and even exporting three millions of bushels annually to the United States. He showed that she did more; that she extended the same relief and encouragement to the Irish; and he read from the British statute book an act of the British Parliament, passed in 1807, entitled *"An act to encourage the export of salted beef and pork from Ireland,"* which allowed a bounty of ten pence sterling on every hundred weight of beef and pork so exported, in consideration of the duty paid on the salt which was used in the curing of it. He stated that at a later period the duty had been entirely repealed; and the Irish, in common with all other subjects of the British empire, allowed a free trade in salt with all the world; and he then demanded, in the most earnest manner, whether the people of the West could not obtain from their own Congress the same justice which the oppressed Irish had received from a British Parliament—a Parliament composed of hereditary nobles, rotten borough representatives, ministerial retainers, and members from three different kingdoms—while their representatives were freely chosen from among themselves, and bound to respect their wishes.

Having shown the enormous amount of the tax, its unequal operation in different sections of the Union, and the superior, claims of the West for its abolition, Mr. B. proceeded to examine the reasons for keeping it up. These were found in the "American system;" for the income from the tax was no longer wanted for revenue. The plea of revenue was cut off by our own conduct. We had voted, two years ago, to reduce the duties one half on wines, and were now voting to reduce them to a fraction on coffee, tea, and chocolate. This is proof unanswerable that the revenue can dispense with a part of the taxes. The objection, then, to the repeal of the salt tax, stands upon the "American system," and thus this system is presented to the people by its own warm friends and zealous champions, as reducing the moderate duties on Champagne wine and imperial tea, which the rich and luxurious alone use, and leaving the enormous and unequal duties upon salt, without which the farmer cannot raise his stock, nor cure his provisions—without which the laboring man cannot eat his dinner, nor the beggar boil his greens. Thus, this system is presented as favoring the rich and luxurious—oppressing the poor and laborious. But let us examine into the plea, and see with what justice, and with what comformity to its own declared principles, the continuation of this tax upon this necessary of life, has been taken under the protecting wing of the "American system." The principles of that system, as I understand them, and practise upon them, are to tax, through the custom house, the foreign rivals of our own essential productions, when by that taxation an adequate supply of the same article, as good and as cheap as the foreign, can be made at home. These were the principles of the system (Mr. B. said) when he was initiated into it; and if they had changed since, he had not changed with them; and he apprehended a promulgation of the change would produce a schism among its followers. Taking these to be the principles of the "American System," let the salt tax be brought to their test. In the fist place, the domestic manufacture had enjoyed all possible protection. The duty was near three hundred per cent, on Liverpool blown, and far higher on alum salt; and to this must be added, so far as relates to the interior manufactories, the protection of distance, the protection of position, the protection arising from the cost of transportation, frequently amounting to two or three hundred per cent more. This great and excessive protection has been enjoyed, without interruption, for the last eighteen years, and partially for twenty years longer. This, surely, is time enough for the trial of a manufacture which requires but little skill or experience to carry it on. It is time enough for the experiment; now for the results. Have the domestic manufactories produced an adequate supply for the country? They have not or half enough. The production of the last year, (1829,) as shown in the returns of the Secretary of the Treasury, is about five millions of bushels; the importation of foreign salt for the same period is about six millions of bushels. This shows the consumption of the year to be eleven millions of bushels, of which the domestic supply is five millions. Here the failure, in the essential test of an adequate supply, is more than one half. In the next place, how is it in point of price? Is the domestic article furnished as cheap as the foreign? Far from it, as already shown, and still farther, as can be shown. The price of the domestic salt along the coast of the Atlantic States, varies at the works from 37 1-2 to 50 cents a bushel. In the interior the usual prices at the works vary at different places from about 80 cents to one dollar; and this for the weighed bushel of 40 pounds, about two pecks and a half, fair measure. The prices of the foreign salt at the import cities, as shown in the custom-house returns for 1820, are, for Liverpool blown, about 15 cents; for Turk's Island, about 8 cents; and for Portugal and Spanish, 7 cents; and for Malta, 6 cents. Leaving out the Liverpool salt, which is made by boiling, and therefore contain *slack* and *bittern*, septic ingredients, which promote, instead of preventing, putrefaction, and renders that salt unfit for curing provisions, and the average price of the strong, pure alum salt, made by solar evaporation in hot climates, is 7 or 8 cents a bushel. Here, then, is another lamentable failure. Instead of being sold as cheap as the foreign, the domestic salt is from four or five to twelve or fifteen times the price of the foreign.

The last inquiry is as to the quality of the domestic article. Is it as good as the foreign? Has near forty years protection succeeded in producing as good an article as that which comes from abroad? This is most essential application of the test; and here again the failure is decisive. The domestic salt will not cure provisions for exportation,—the little excepted which is made by solar evaporation in the Northeast,—nor for consumption in the South, nor for long keeping at the army posts, nor for voyages with the navy. For all these purposes, the domestic fire-made salt is worthless and useless, and the provisions which are put up in it are lost, or have to be repacked, at great expense, in alum salt. This fact is well known throughout the West, where too many citizens have paid the penalty of trusting to domestic salt to be deceived and injured by it any longer. In proof of this, Mr. B. read a statement from a citizen of Indiana, Mr. J. G. Read, whose respectability he vouched for, alleging that he had sustained a loss or near $350 upon a cargo of 300 barrels of pork, at New Orleans, in 1827, in consequence of putting it up in domestic salt. The pork began to spoil as soon as it arrived in the warm latitude of the South. To save it, Mr. Read had to incur the expense of repacking in alum salt,—a process which cost him $1 12 1-2 on each barrel, besides 12 1-2 cents for replacing each hoop which got broken in the operation, and the further expense of drayage, in hauling the pork to and from the place of repacking. Mr. B. said that this was the case with one and all. They must repack in alum salt, at New Orleans, or procure that kind of salt before hand, burthened as it was with the duty, and diminished as it was in quantity by the substitution of the weighed for the measured bushel. Surely the great West cannot present this picture of imposition to the Congress, and ask, in vain, for the relief which the Irish, proverbial oppression, received from the British parliament. And here he submitted to the Senate that the "American System," without a gross departure from its original principles, could not cover this duty any longer. It has had the full benefit of that system in high duties, imposed for a long time, on foreigh salt. The protection has not produced its promised result; the supply is not adequate, the cost is not as cheap, and the quality, so far from being equal, is not even fit to be used for one of the greatest purposes for which salt is wanted.

Mr. B. examined another ground of claim for the continuance of this duty, founded on the amount of capital which the manufacturers had embarked in the business. They had returned this capital at upwards of three millions of dollars; but when you come to analyze the particulars of this imposing sum, two millions of it are found to be taken up with wooden vats, and the scantling roofs, which are in a state of daily deterioration, & must rot in a few years, whether used or not. Such items could not be counted as capital, unless when new, or nearly so; and, it is not to be presumed that any new works have been erected since the problem of paying off the public debt has been discussed and solved, & the consequent reduction of a great amount of taxation fully calculated upon. Another portion of this capital was in kettles, also a perishable, item, to which the same remark applies as to the wooden vats. A third large item in the estimate of these three millions of capital is a great number of wells and furnaces, left to stand idel on purpose, in order to make less salt, and to obtain higher prices for it. Deducting all these items, or so much of each as ought to be deducted, and it would probably turn out that the boasted capital vested in these works did not exceed the amount of one year's tax upon the people to keep them up! That tax has been shown to be, for the year 1829, in the duty itself paid to the Government, $1,200,000; in merchants' profit upon that sum, at 50 per cent, $600,000; in loss between the weighed and measured bushel, $450,000; making two millions and a quarter; besides the injury to stock for want of adequate supplies of salt, the amount of which was incalculable. The real capital employed in all the salt works, in all probability, does not reach near that sum. The capital to be affected by the repeal of the duty cannot be the half of it; for none but the wooden vats and thin board roofs on the sea board would be affected; all the rest are protected by distance. The salt works in western Pennsylvania, in western Virginia, in Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, are beyond the reach of foreign salt, except at an advance of two or three hundred per cent. upon its cost. They are protected without a protecting duty. They are protected by distance—by locality—by mountains—and by the expense of transporting foreign salt into the sphere of their supply and consumption. Doubtless it would be better for the consumers to purchase all the works, and let them lie idle, than to go on paying the present enormous duty, and encountering all its accumulated burthens, to keep them up. But this alternative cannot be necessary. The consumers of salt cannot be driven to this resort. After what we have done in relieving luxuries on comforts from taxation—after reducing the duties on tea, coffee, wines, and chocolate—the tax on salt—must fall! The American System cannot keep it up. That system cannot continue to tax the first necessary of life, after untaxing its luxuries. The duty was suppressed *in toto* under the administration of Mr. Jefferson. The probable extinction of the public debt enabled the Government, at that time, to dispense with certain taxes, and salt took precedence then of tea, coffee, chocolate and wine. The certain extinction of the public debt now opens the way for a large reduction of taxes, and certainly SALT ought to be placed at the head of the list of articles on which the reduction is to take place. The domestic salt makers need not speak of protection against alum salt. No quantity of tax will keep it out; no quantity of protection will enable them to make it. The provision curers must have it, cost what it may; and the Present Government tax upon that species of salt was a gratuitous oppression upon the whole stock raising and provision curing parts of the Union.

Mr. B. did not deem it necessary to dilate upon the uses of salt; but in England the uses of this article in rural economy, and in manufactures, were thought worthy of occupying the time and labors of a most important committee, who examined more than seventy witnesses, and established by proof that salt was necessary to the health, growth, and fattening of hogs, horses, sheep and cattle; that it was a preservative of hay and clover, and restored flooded or moulded hay to its good and wholesome state, and made even straw and chaff available as food for cattle; that it was necessary in a great variety of manufactures; and that the annual injury to the stock of England, for want of adequate supplies of salt, might be estimated at three millions of pounds sterling, about fifteen millions of dollars; and that manufactures were burthened by the tax to the amount of one and a half millions sterling per annum, about seven millions of dollars. Before such views as these the salt tax fell in England: will it be able to stand up against similar views in our America?

Mr. B. said it was an argument in favor of keeping up this duty, that in time of war we should have to depend upon the home supply. He said we had no war at present, nor any prospect of one, and that it was neither wise nor profitable to anticipate and suffer beforehand by voluntary assumption, the evils and privations of that calamitous state. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. Suffering now will not diminish the sufferance when war comes. But he did not admit the validity of the argument. The making of salt was a plain and easy business. It required no skill, or experience. If a part of the works stop when the price is low, they will start again the day it rises. If the whole were stopped now, they would all be in full operation in the first few months of a war. Besides, many works were stopped now. On the Kenhawa 24 furnaces, capable of making 400,000 bushels per annum, are returned by the owners as idle. On the Holston only one well is worked, making 500 bushels a day when 10,000 could be made. At many oth-