

For Sale – “By the Candle”

"Forty chests of sugar returned in the Blessing are to be sold by the candle"
 —British East India Company December 6, 1643

How did American colonial merchants actually acquire the shiploads of goods they needed to stock their shops and warehouses? And how did an aspiring merchant, trader or captain purchase an entire ship including its cannons and sails during colonial times?

In order to get the highest prices for their cargoes of bags of coffee, barrels of molasses or crates of china, colonial shipmasters would advertise to auction their cargoes soon after landing at the wharf. Interested buyers would come together at the local coffee house to bid on the goods in a particularly unique type of auction—“sale by the candle.”

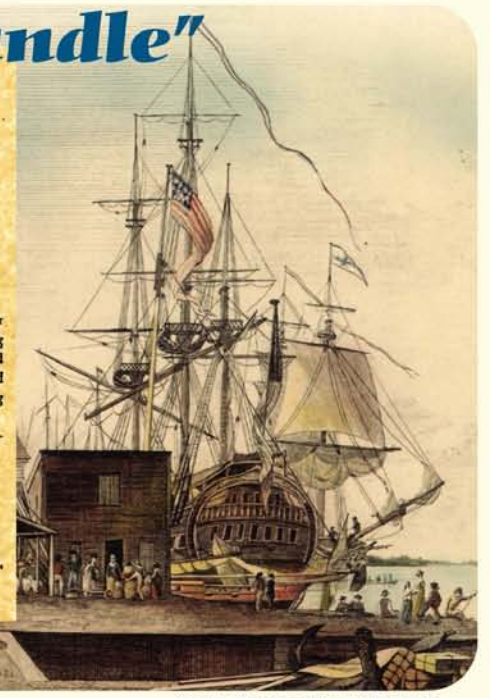
Townfolk and merchants would assemble at the coffee-house, sip a beverage, and intermittently shout out a bid for the cargo up for sale (perhaps 40 chests of sugar). The last high bidder would purchase the entire lot of merchandise or whichever ship was on the auction block. In order to determine when the rowdy, shouted bidding should end, the auctioneer would draw a line about an inch below the flame of a candle. When the candle had burned down to line, the bidding was closed. Because of disagreements about when the flame actually reached the line, and which buyer was the last to bid, a unique method was devised. The auctioneer would poke a pin into the wax of the candle about an inch below the top. The candle was then lit and the seller would use a quill to register each bid as the candle melted down. The last

S A L E
 BY THE
C A N D L E,
 At the COFFEE-HOUSE, NEW YORK
 On FRIDAY, the 15th Day of JULY, 1796,
 at Two o'Clock precisely,
 THE GOOD GALLIOT
CATHARINE,
 Round Stern, Dutch built, and free, 140 Tons Register
 Tonnage; is well calculated for the Coal or Coasting
 Trade, shifts without Ballast, draws little Water, and
 takes the Ground well; is well found in Stores, and
 may be sent to Sea at a small Expence. Now lying
 at the Whitehall Stairs.

I N V E N T O R Y.

Shall, Mails, Yards, standing and running Rigging, with all Tools, as they now lie.

<p>A N C H O R S.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Best anchor 1 Half anchor 1 Small ditto 1 Ring <p>C A B L E S.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Best ditto 1 Small ditto 	<p>1 Main Mast <p>1 Fore Mast <p>1 Mizen Mast <p>1 Top Mast <p>1 Bottom Mast </p></p></p></p></p>	<p>1 Main Mast <p>1 Fore Mast <p>1 Mizen Mast <p>1 Top Mast <p>1 Bottom Mast </p></p></p></p></p>	<p>1 Boring falls <p>1 Trawl ditto <p>1 Dredge ditto <p>1 Boat's ditto </p></p></p></p>	<p>C O P Y R I G H T S</p> <p>S T O R E S</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Hand bags 1 Iron ditto
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Courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia

high bid that was shouted out—at the very instant the wax around the pin liquefied and it fell out onto the tabletop—would be the successful one. A witness who attended just such a sale in 1660 was Samuel Pepys, and he seemed to enjoy the raucous proceedings.

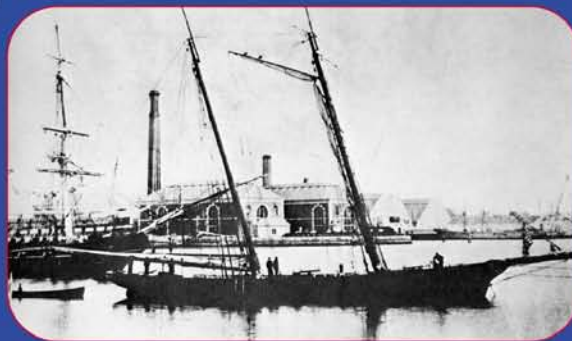
"...Mr. Creed and I to Wilkinson s, and dined together, and ...we met all, for the sale of two ships by an inch of candle (the first time that ever I saw any of this kind), where I observed how they do invite one another, and at last how they all do cry, and we have much to do to tell who did cry last. The ships were the Indian, sold for 1,300£, and the Half-moon, sold for 830£."

Samuel Pepys Diary—Tuesday 6 November 1660.

Racing past all her English rivals, in a sailing competition against the best yachts and crews of the British Royal Yacht Squadron, the world's most famous yacht, *America*, fought for and won the 100 *Guinea Cup* in 1851. The *Cup*, better known today as *America's Cup*, is recognized, world-wide, as a symbol of the best of yachting. Ten years later, the same *America* found itself involved in a much more violent type of competition—the American Civil War. Throughout this bloody conflict, the intrepid little ship won the respect of her crews on both sides of the war. It performed admirably for the Union AND the Confederate Navies.

After that legendary 1851 yacht race, an English gentleman bought *America* and sailed throughout Europe. But when the Civil War broke out a decade later, the boat was dispatched to the southern port city of Savannah, Georgia and purchased for service as a blockade runner by the Confederate States

☆ Yacht of War ☆



Courtesy of Mystic Seaport Museum

The raked masts of the Union "war-yacht" *America* stand out among the other Union warships resting in Charleston harbor in 1863. Note the cannon mounted on the weather deck.

Navy. *America* was ordered to race directly through the enemy fleet and smuggle cargo to the Southern states.

The swift, low yacht outran all pursuing Union warships and delivered vital war material and messages to the Confederate Army. During the night of 11 March 1862 *America* was chased up a shallow creek in Florida by a Union gunboat. Scuttled by her retreating crew, the famous yacht was quickly salvaged and reconditioned by the Union Navy. Now the tables were turned. As a commissioned US Navy warship, *America* and her crew, stationed off the port of Charleston, South Carolina, were ordered to pursue and capture Confederate blockade-runners. After the war ended, and well into the next century, the *America* served the US Navy as a training vessel for young officer candidates at the US Naval Academy. The legend of *America* (and salvaged parts of the original yacht) continue to live on as reminders of the best of the American spirit and character.