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TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS
OF THE SALT MONOPOLY IN ANTE-BELLUM DAYS
IN THE TENNESSEE VALLEY

by

Dr. Leland R. Johnson

In 1973 Leland R. Johnson, a past contributor to the Review, wrote a letter to Elbert Watson, the past editor of the Review. Unfortunately, it was lost in the transition of officers and editor; only recently discovered, it is finally presented to the membership, as Dr. Johnson wished.

I expected that when I initiated study of river navigation and Engineer activities in the states of Ohio and West Virginia I would no longer be distracted by historical documents relating to Tennessee Valley and Huntsville history, but such has not been the case.

While researching the history of the Kanawha Valley (in West Virginia. The Kanawha or Great Kanawha River is a tributary of the Ohio, formed by the junction of New and Gauley Rivers in West Virginia.) and its early salt industry I found information relating to the history of Huntsville in U. S., Congress, Senate, The Trade In, and Manufacture and Uses of Salt, S. Doc. No. 196, 26 Congress, 1 Session, 1840. Inclosed is a copy of that information.

Background is as follows: manufacturers of salt in the Kanawha Valley organized the first "trust" (or monopoly) in the history of the United States in 1816. In 1839, Senator

Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri (formerly of Tennessee and an officer of General Jackson's army which operated in Alabama during the War of 1812) launched a congressional investigation of the Kanawha salt trust, which, by limiting production, was keeping prices at a high level. He mailed a list of 30 questions to community leaders throughout the West and Midwest. The first xerox sheet (of pp. 2-3) are his questions; the second sheet (pp. 40-41) prints the reply of G. T. C. McClanahan of Jackson County, Alabama; the third sheet (pp. 42-43) continues McClanahan's¹ reply and begins the reply of Dr. William H. Glasscock,² Thomas Miller,³ and Charles A. Jones⁴ of Madison County, Alabama; sheet four (pp. 44-45) concludes the Madison County reply.

Possibly you might like to print the material in the Review as filler, or perhaps some member of the Historical Society might like to edit the materials, identifying people, places, and so forth.

Queries upon the salt monopoly in the west, and upon the price and quality of salt in that quarter of the Union, and upon the measurement thereof, and upon the abuses and impositions in the manufacture and sale of salt. Submitted to his constituents, for their answers, by THOMAS H. BENTON. — September 1, 1839.

1. What are the varieties or different kinds of salt usually sold in your part of the country?
2. Is it sold by the weighed or measured

bushel? and if by the former, how many pounds are allowed to the bushel?

3. Do you know of any law in your State which authorizes 50 pounds of salt to be sold for a bushel?

4. Is the selling of salt a free trade, subject to general competition in your part of the country; or is it a monopoly in the hands of one, or a few in a place? If the latter, how many salt merchants are there in your town or county, and do they seem to be of the same company or combination? and do they seem to have limits and bounds for each one to sell in exclusively?

5. What is the present selling price of different kinds of salt in your neighborhood, by the single bushel? and what has been its highest and also its lowest price by the single bushel at any time within the last five or ten years?

6. What is the price by the barrel? and also what is the highest and what the lowest price by the barrel at any time within several years past?

7. When sold by the barrel, is it sold according to the real weight at the time of sale, or according to the weight marked upon the barrel when first filled, commonly call lick weight?

8. Is the real weight generally, or always, below the marked weight? and if so, what is the usual difference, and what the greatest difference that you have heard or know of? what is the tare allowed for the barrel, and what its real weight?

9. Are the barrels sometimes exposed in the open air to the sun and rain, either while coming to market or waiting sale, so as to add

wastage from such exposure to defective weight from drying and leaking?

10. Is an increased price demanded for the salt if re-weighed, and, if so, what is the usual amount of the increase?

11. How many bushels by weight are usually marked on a barrel?

12. How many measured bushels would the same barrel contain?

13. After deducting for wastage, leakage, and drying, how many measured bushels does a barrel usually contain? and what is the lowest quantity it has been known to contain?

14. What would be the weight of a measured bushel of each variety of salt in your neighborhood?

15. Does the credit usually given on the sale of goods and groceries in your part of the country extend to salt; or is this an exception from the general rule, and sold for ready money only?

16. Is your part of the country regularly and plentifully supplied with salt; or does it occasionally suffer for want of an adequate supply?

17. Do you know of any instances of extortionate rise in the price of salt? and, if so, state the time and circumstances.

18. Do you know whether there is lime, bitter water, or other impurities, in any of the kinds of salt sold in your neighborhood? and, if so, in which of the kinds? and how do you detect the impurities — by chemical analysis, or common observation?

19. Is the domestic salt fit for pickling beef and pork, and for preserving butter and

curing bacon for exportation, or long keeping, or consumption in the south?

20. Do you know, or have you heard from credible sources, of any practices among salt-makers to adulterate their salt by using tal-low, or other substances, to cause lime, or bitter water, or other impurities, to be re-tained in it, to increase its weight? and, if so, state the circumstances.

21. Do you know, or have you heard from credible sources, of any combinations, or compa-nies, or individuals, undertaking to monopolize the manufacture and sale of salt at any of the works which supply the west? and, if so, at what times and places? with such particulars as you may know or have heard of.

22. Do you know, or have you heard, of any practices among such monopolizers to restrict or lessen the quantity of salt made, either by renting wells and furnaces, and letting them lie idle; or by paying owners not to work their wells, or a part of them; or by hiring persons not to dig or bore new wells; or by entering into arrangements with salt-makers not to make above a certain and limited quantity each?

23. Do you know, or have you heard from credible sources, of any arrangements among salt-makers and monopolists to district the country for the sale of their salt, or to have the ex-clusive supply within certain limits; and, if so, the particulars which have come to your knowledge.

24. Do you know, or have you been credibly informed, of any combinations among salt-makers and monopolizers to raise the price of salt, and to keep it up? and, if so, how much such rise may have been, either at the works, or at the place of sale where you live?

25. Do you know, or have you been in like manner informed, of any combinations or agreements among the monopolizers not to sell salt below a fixed price, but as much above it as any one pleased?
26. What is the lowest price of salt that you have heard or know of, at any of the works, when there was no monopoly? and what the highest price at the same works, when there was?
27. Have the people in your part of the country ever been so necessitated for salt as to be obliged to submit to impositions, and to take such as they could get, at such price and measure as the monopolists chose to prescribe, and of such quality as they offered?
28. Is salt sold or bartered for produce in your part of the country, or only for ready money?
29. Would the people of your part of the country use more salt if they could get it cheaper, and of good quality, and fair measure?
30. What should be the price of alum salt in your part of the country, supposing the duty to be repealed, and the import price at New Orleans to be, by the measured bushel weighing eighty-four pounds, as follows: For Turk's Island, and other Bahama Island salt, from eight to nine cents a bushel; for St. Ubes and other Portugese and Spanish salt, from six to seven cents a bushel; for Mediterranean and Italian salt, from four to five cents a bushel; for Adriatic salt, from three to four cents a bushel. Supposing these to be the import prices of pure sun-made alum salt at New Orleans, and purchaseable there by barter, in exchange for provisions and other western productions, what should be the fair selling price of the article where you live? and what should it cost the farmer if he had it pur-

chased and bought up on his own account, without paying profit to a merchant, or duty to the Government?

Communication from G. T. C. McClanahan, Esq., of Jackson county, North Alabama, October, 1830.

Your 1st query.—The trade of salt is entirely monopolized here by James White, of the Holston salt-works, in Virginia. I cannot exactly tell to what States these works furnish salt, but it is to be supposed to the western parts of Virginia, eastern part of Tennessee, a part of North Carolina, the northern part of Georgia, North Alabama, and some in South Alabama.

Query 2d. Colonel J. White has a depot at this place, a mile and a half from Tennessee river, down which stream he boats his salt. And if any person else brings salt here to sell, they immediately undersell that person and ruin him. The people sometimes get their salt from Nashville, when they have a convenience of doing so; and it comes much cheaper, after paying land carriage 130 miles, than White's salt; but no person dares to compete with him here, because he can, at his will, undersell any person who pays a land carriage of 130 miles; and therefore instantly break him up. One thing is yet to be told, which will convince any man of the sin and oppression of this monopolizing system. This same James White will carry his salt by us down to Ditto's landing, 10 miles below Huntsville; haul it out to Winchester, Tennessee, which is 55 miles of land carriage, and sell it there so much lower than he will here on the river, (take it out of his boats,) that some of the planters, who are able, take their wagons, and cross a very bad mountain, (part of the Cumberland,) and haul their salt over from Win-

chester, which is 45 miles from this place. Is this not oppressive to the poor? Would not this monopolist wring from the distressed orphan, widow, and war-worn soldier, all their earthly sustenance? And yet the Congress of the United States, this boasted land of liberty and equal laws, countenances such oppressive acts. Why does Mr. White not sell as low here on the river as at Winchester, after carrying his salt 120 miles — 55 by land? and that, too, the very same salt. The answer is obvious. At Winchester there is some competition; it is not so far from Nashville, where foreign salt may be obtained. And this is why he sells it lower there than at this place.

We are here fenced in with almost impassable mountains, at a great distance from any commercial depot, and without the means of shunning the exorbitant exactions of these vampyres, who take the bread from the mouths of our children with the calculating coldness of an Arab. And these acts are legalized by a Congress of freemen! We are glad to hear the stern voice of indignation at this oppression uttered by some of the patriotic republicans of that body; and we should glory in being among the most persecuted victims, if by that means this most pernicious system of monopoly could be overturned.

Query 3d. We have no foreign salt here for sale; two years ago some gentlemen brought a few bushels from Nashville, and sold for \$1.87½ per 50 lbs., underselling the salt gentlemen here at that time. The domestic salt has got lower than it was four years ago. Then, it was \$2.50; now, \$1.87 to \$2.

The freight from New Orleans to Nashville is one cent per pound, as I am informed by a merchant of this place; and from Nashville to this place one and a quarter cent per pound.

4. There is a depot here, and another at Ditto's landing, as I am told, for selling salt. These places are about 55 miles apart by land. The remaining part of the question I do not know anything about.

5. Col. White, as I have been informed by good authority, leased the Preston salt-works, in what is called New Virginia, for \$9,000 or \$12,000 annually; but I am further informed that the lease is out, and the works are to go into active operation to compete with White, he having let them be idle heretofore. These are "dead wells," but the number of dead wells he has I am unable to inform you.

6. Salt is sold here by weight, 50 lbs. to the bushel; and 50 lbs. (the bushel) of the salt, which I tried (without pressing) measured 1,188.4632 solid inches, making 4 gallons 1.5952 quart, dry measure, which is but very little over half a measured bushel. Therefore, when salt is two dollars the 50 lbs., we have to pay at the rate of \$3.66½ the measured bushel. This is oppression in a free country; this is the fruit of the tariff.

7. In selling by the barrel, the weight of the barrel and the nett weight of salt is sometimes, and most commonly, placed on the barrel; but the weight of the barrel is marked much less than its real weight.

They make no deduction for the drying of the salt. One barrel I particularly weighed out, and it lost twenty pounds; and I am credibly informed that some have lost as much as fifty.

8. The monopolists here sell for money, or cotton at the cash price, which is the same thing as money. They do not credit their salt. There are always two prices for cotton here - a cash and a discount price. Merchants, in

taking in cotton for their accounts, give more for it than they will in money; and this is called the discount price. The salt gentlemen sell their salt for cotton at the cash price. The remaining part of the query I know nothing about.

9. The monopolists have fallen here, since they find that people would go to Nashville for their salt if they did not. But they know at what price to keep it up; they know the planters cannot take the trouble to go 130 miles to Nashville to get a little salt; and they know that no person dares to compete with them, as they could instantly reduce the price of their salt, and thereby ruin their competitor.

10. They certainly must realize great gains, or they would not give nine or twelve thousand dollars annually for one manufactory to let it lie idle. Why does not Congress lease all the salt-works in the United States, and let them lie idle, and then knock the duty off of salt, if they wish to encourage the manufacture of salt by filling the pockets of the manufacturers? It would be much better for the people. They would be great gainers by purchasing the salt-works and demolishing them, or letting them out at a small rate, and then striking the duty from salt.

The remaining queries I am in hopes will find abler persons to answer them than I.

Communication from a meeting of the citizens of Madison county, Alabama, 8th of November, 1830; the subject proposed by Dr. William H. Glasscock, and authenticated by the signatures of Thomas Miller, president, and Charles A. Jones, secretary.

Answer to 1st. The salt consumed here is

almost exclusively obtained from Col. James White's manufactory of Virginia, and sold by his agents in East Tennessee, a part of North Alabama, and West Tennessee.

To the 2d, we can give no definite answer.

3d. The price of domestic salt is \$1.25 per bushel by the barrel, or \$1.75 by the single bushel. Foreign salt sells at about the same. The freight of salt from New Orleans to Huntsville is about $1 \frac{3}{4}$ cent per pound.

4th. Col. White has salt deposited in different parts of this State, and others at various distances from each other — say 10 to 15 miles.

5th. Preston's works were for some time discontinued for (say) ten thousand dollars per annum.

6th. Universally sold by weight, allowing 50 pounds to the bushel; the measured bushel will weight from 70 to 80 pounds.

7th. When the salt is weighed out of the barrel, it seldom holds out, and frequently loses from 5 to 20 pounds. We may add, that however honestly it may have been put up at the works, it is generally brought down in open boats, subject to the winter rains, which damage it more or less; and we know of but one of his agents who sells it any other way than by the marked weight.

8th. Salt is sold for nothing else but ready money.

9th. Salt is sold high or low, according to competition. The Kenawha, ground alum, and Liverpool, are brought in but sparingly, which is the only competition.

10th. We believe that White realizes great gains. We are sustained in this opinion from

his carrying it by land 25 or 30 miles farther, where he meets with competition, and selling it for less than he does here.

11th. Wholly unfit.

12th. It will not be received for either.

13th. We can give no correct answer.

14th. It is indispensable for stock of all kinds. It is thought they require more in the western States than maritime States, owing, probably, to the absence of the sea-breeze, and vapor impregnated with salt coming from the sea and alighting on the vegetable matter. Stock of all kinds should be salted twice a week; but owing to the high price of salt, the stock are probably not salted more than once in two weeks, on an average. From the best accounts, 3,000 barrels of salt are consumed annually in Madison county, averaging about 6 bushels (of 50 lbs.) to the barrel. The population being about 27,000 gives us, on an average, $33\frac{1}{2}$ pounds to each person. Were those heavy duties taken off, the consumption would be much greater.

15th. Salt is thought to be useful in preserving hay, fodder, and clover; each will keep well, if sprinkled over with it, though not thoroughly cured when put up. Moreover, our pork is often spoiled from the want of a sufficiency of salt to pack it up in, which we cannot obtain on account of the high price. Thousands and tens of thousands of pounds are often lost from that circumstance alone. Alum salt would be an immense saving to North Alabama, in that one particular.

Resolved, therefore, unanimously, That the delegation from this State, as well as those of our sister States, have our unfeigned thanks for their exertions and co-operation,

the last session of Congress, with Mr. Benton, in endeavoring to repeal the duty on salt; and that we request our delegation to use their utmost to effect the repeal of a tax so burdensome to us, and of no ultimate advantage to any State.

FOOTNOTES

¹This pioneer is not identified in any of the standard early histories of the region, such as DuBose, Pickett, Garrett, or Saunders, nor in Kenamer's History of Jackson County (Winchester, 1935).

²Dr. William H. Glasscock was a member of the Alabama legislature during the period 1830 to 1835 but was defeated in 1835 when he ran for the federal congress. Judge Thomas Taylor, A History of Madison County (University: Confederate Publishing Company), p.111.

³Thomas Miller was a prominent land holder in the northern part of Madison and Jackson Counties. Taylor mentions that he purchased land in the area during the first land sale and added to his holdings in the sales of July, 1830. He also subscribed \$20.00 to the Texas independence cause, at New Market, on May 18, 1836. Taylor, p. 107.

⁴Jones is not mentioned in Taylor, nor the other reference sources listed in footnote one.

