

Contents

Foreword

Acknowledgements

Preface

1 Child of New London

2 Sailor on the Atlantic

3 Author from Boston

4 Merchant in West Africa

5 Resident on Gorée Island

6 Consul to Senegal

7 Retiree in Dorchester

8 Summary and Conclusions

Epilogue

Notes

Peter Strickland Genealogy

Peter Strickland Chronology

Bibliography

About the Author

Indices

People

Places

Vessels

General

Preface

A purchase on eBay led to the writing of this book. In the 1990s, I had published three books in three continents: in Conakry, Guinea; in Jakarta, Indonesia; and in San Salvador, El Salvador. I based each book on vintage picture postcards I had collected as a hobby, tracing the social history of each country over the period 1900–1950. I wrote the books as a side interest while serving as manager of local education projects for the U.S. Agency for International Agency (USAID).

In the year 2000, I was assigned to USAID headquarters in Washington to be “desk officer” for several West African countries. In particular, I provided support from Washington for USAID programs in Senegal. Since other authors had already produced superb volumes¹ featuring evocative postcards of Senegal as a French colony, I resolved to identify a different topic somehow connected to Senegal for a new book. Seeking inspiration, I opened the online auction site eBay, registered as a new member, and typed in “Senegal” as my category of interest.

After a minute’s wait a list of about one hundred items for sale appeared, including sets of old postage stamps, the national flag, old postcards, Senegal parrot T-shirts, and a hand-carved djembe drum. Then my gaze stopped on an envelope bearing a handsome blue three-cent stamp of President James Garfield—and beautifully penned in 1889 to a “Capt. Peter Strickland, U.S. Consul, Gorée, West Africa.” I successfully bid on the item.

When the envelope arrived in the mail, I looked it over carefully. The skillfully opened envelope contained no letter or return address. Further

examination revealed three faint postmarks on the back as well as two clear postmarks on the front side. The correspondent had written “via Bordeaux” on the address side. Using a magnifying glass to make out some of the cancellation marks, I was able to piece together the itinerary of the mysterious and enticing envelope. The letter had left Boston on August 2, 1889, and arrived in Paris on August 11. The back of the envelope was postmarked August 12 in Bordeaux and August 13 in Marseilles, suggesting that the letter was rerouted to catch a steamship leaving earlier from that port for Africa. After Bordeaux, Marseilles was the second most important trading port between France and its African possessions. The letter arrived on August 22 in Gorée, Senegal. Twenty days from Boston to Gorée in 1889; sometimes it takes as long today!

Eager to know more about my eBay treasure, I hastened to learn the identity of Capt. Peter Strickland. I e-mailed the Office of the Historian at the State Department to see if they had any records on Strickland, consul to West Africa. State Department historical files included only the barest information: Strickland came from Connecticut, received a recess appointment in 1883 to become the first consul in Senegal, and resigned from the consular service in 1906. The office admitted that it had no record of his postcareer activities. They did suggest, however, that I contact the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), where his original consular dispatches should be housed.

At this point, I still had no clear notion as to what sort of book I would write, but with much excitement, I contacted NARA. Two 35mm microfilm reels contained the dispatches sent by Strickland to the State

Department; I purchased copies by mail. The reels contain nearly 900 pages, centered on 272 dispatches from Senegal to Washington, D.C. Some of the consecutively numbered dispatches were accompanied by printed consular forms, which the consul had filled out. Strickland sent some dispatches and letters while on leave in the United States. In addition to the reports, the consul had sent maps, newspaper clippings, photos, and postcards. Not many diplomats send postcards to the State Department.

I pounced on a postcard Strickland had sent in 1905, labeled, "244. SENEGAL – Gorée – ensemble du port," showing the port area of Gorée in Senegal. Over a white building, Strickland had hand-drawn an oversized flagpole displaying a flag.² He labeled the building, "Position consular office." When I saw the consulate's location on the island, a conspicuous spot overlooking the wharf area, I wondered right away whether the building had survived.

Gorée Island is notorious because West Africans taken into bondage were packed onto slave ships there to make the long Atlantic crossing to the Americas. It is also known as a strategic military and economic outpost that frequently changed hands among colonial powers: Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French. Before Dakar, Gorée served as the capital of French West Africa.

As soon as I could manage a trip to Africa, I took the twenty-minute ferry ride from Dakar on the mainland to Gorée. Approaching the wharf, I spotted the imposing building, now painted crimson and ochre like many of the colorful Gorée houses. A tall, bearded Frenchman in shorts answered my knock at the door of the first American consulate in Senegal. I introduced myself, explaining my interest in the U.S. consul who

had lived there. When, in the course of the conversation, he revealed that he was renting the house, I asked who the owner was. He replied, “A French doctor who lives in Paris.” “What is his name?” I pursued. “Martin Schlumberger,” came the answer. My jaw dropped. I exclaimed to him, “Mais, Martin, c’est mon cousin.” He’s my cousin.

I had last seen Martin, a distant cousin by marriage on my mother’s side, thirty years before in Fada Ngourma in the West African country of Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta). I phoned him that evening from a télé-centre on Gorée and promised to see him in Paris on my way back to the United States. We had a lot of catching up to do.

In this research project, not only was I learning a lot about Strickland. I was finding out something about myself. My family had played a role in the Strickland story: it owned the building housing the first American consulate in French West Africa. In conducting historical research in Senegal, I had become part of the story.

Chance and coincidence thus marked the genesis of this book. But who did Capt. Peter Strickland turn out to be? Only two common references to Peter Strickland exist on library shelves. A century ago, the rank of consul qualified its holder for listing in a Who’s Who publication. Strickland never made it into the national Who’s Who, but he did appear in the first (1909) and second (1916) editions of the regional version, Who’s Who in New England. Here is the earlier entry.

STRICKLAND, PETER, consul; b. Montville, Conn., Aug. 1, 1837; s. Peter R. and Laura (White) S.; ed. pub. schs., Montville and New

London, and under tuition of father; m. New London, Conn., June 11, 1861, Mary Louise Rogers. Taught sch. in Conn. at 15; adopted seafaring life and was 2d mate of ship at 19, chief mate at 20, master at 24; engaged in African trade from Boston as capt. and later as capt. and supercargo, continuing until 1877 when became agt. in Africa; Am consul, French W. Africa, since 1883; lived in tropical Africa about 30 yrs. Address, 102 Neponset Av., Boston.³

Secondly, a well-known reference work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century personalities: *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, published in 1899,⁴ devotes a column to Peter Strickland, illustrated with his engraved portrait.

Combining these sources, we meet a man with five occupations to his credit: schoolteacher, book author, shipmaster, merchant, and consul. When he was not aboard a ship, he divided his life between the New England seacoast (New London and Boston) and Senegal, West Africa (Dakar and Gorée Island). Strickland was also a family man: he married a New Londoner and fathered two boys and two girls.

A visit to the Cedar Grove Cemetery in New London revealed his family's fate, through records in the cemetery office and city hall and the 16 x 25 foot family burial plot. A nine-foot high granite stone displays dates and epitaphs on each of its four sides. The first to perish was the consul's firstborn and namesake: baby Peter Strickland died of bronchitis in New London in 1863 at age ten months. Next was the second son, George, who died in 1888 at age twenty-three by accidentally drowning off the coast of West Africa, where he was serving his father as vice consul.

The second daughter, Grace, died in Boston of diphtheria in 1906, aged thirty-one. Only the first daughter, Mary, lived a long life, dying in Boston of bronchial pneumonia in 1945 at age seventy-seven. Their mother and Captain Strickland's wife, Mary Louise Rogers, lived to eighty-two, dying in Boston in 1915. No cause appeared in any known record. Peter Strickland himself died in Boston of arterial sclerosis in 1921 at age eighty-three. No child had married; the Peter Strickland line died out.

Library reference works, family gravestones, and consular dispatches provided skeletal information on the man who became the first American consul to Senegal and French West Africa. An internet search via Google revealed that two library repositories in the eastern United States housed important collections of Peter Strickland's papers: the Mystic Seaport Library in Mystic, Connecticut, and the University of Delaware Library in Newark.

These papers contain ship logs that Captain Strickland neatly kept; business ledgers that merchant Strickland maintained, with names of business partners, lists of expenditures, and inventories of ship cargoes; and "letter-books," hardbound albums filled with yellow carbon copies of letters Strickland wrote, mainly on business topics but including a few family letters. The carbon impression is often faint and hard to read. There are over 2,000 letters, the first written in 1876, and the last in 1921.

Finally, the papers include Strickland's personal journal, the most valuable source of all. His first entry was in 1857, when he set out as second mate on a sea voyage to Europe at the age of nineteen. His last entry was in the year of his death. In his later years, Strickland copied his early diaries—which had

survived in his wooden seaman's chest—into hardbound albums. What this means is that the records are much more legible than they might have been; in many cases, they are still in mint condition. The journal covers a sixty-four-year span and contains over 2,500 pages.

When I had finally read through all the journal pages, however, I realized that the entries covered only twenty-five years—less than the sixty-four years the journal purported to cover and less than one half of Strickland's adult life. In addition, dozens of pages have clearly been ripped out. A bookmark I found in one letter-book offered a clue. It consisted of a clipping from the Boston Transcript dated Aug. 30, 1924, three years after the captain's death. Someone had been looking through his papers. Who? Daughter Mary? Perhaps she lived with the family memorabilia for another two decades.

I decided to write a biography, touching on all aspects of Strickland's long life, and relying heavily on his astonishing journal. Attempting to fill the gaps in information available in the Strickland papers, I widened my search, using modern technology. Logging onto an online bulletin board devoted to Strickland genealogy, I posted a message announcing my research project on Captain Peter Strickland, telling all Stricklands that I was looking for Peter's photograph. A few weeks later, I received a reply on the bulletin board: "I do not have a photograph of Peter Strickland for you, but I think I live in his house."

I began an exchange of e-mails with this correspondent, who had recently purchased a farmhouse that belonged to a Peter Strickland in the mid-1700s. A 1754 deed found in the New London

land records indicates that Peter Strickland purchased eighty acres of land on the Norwich Road from the Rogers brothers. I discovered there were actually eight Peter Stricklands from the mid-1600s to the 1900s. The New London farmhouse, built on a large tract of land, belonged to the great grandfather of “our” Peter Strickland. He passed it down to his son and grandson (Peter’s father), who sold it in 1833, four years before Peter was born. Nevertheless, it was an imposing house on the Norwich Road that Peter may have known as a youth. As a young boy, Peter Strickland may also have known that on September 6, 1781, when Benedict Arnold burned New London during the Revolutionary War, the townspeople fled the coastal areas. They sought refuge in farmhouses along the Norwich Road, perhaps finding shelter at the home of great grandfather Peter Strickland (1718–1801).

I learned that a Strickland couple in California had compiled a genealogy of the “Descendants of Peter Strickland.” I obtained a copy. It covers the period 1646–1907. Another Strickland living in Connecticut put together genealogical “pedigrees” of the Peter Strickland family with seals and arms. The last few years have witnessed the development of a “Strickland DNA Project Website,” where one can follow the attempts to track and match family members across the United States. The family gets together for summer reunions.

In New London, I spent hours looking through documents in the Rare Books Room at the Public Library. While many volumes gave me information on the city’s history, I found very few references to any Peter Strickland.

In the New London city hall, I went through several of the annual New London city directories. In

the 1863 issue, I found P. Strickland listed as a mariner living at 15 Blinman St. Strickland had given this address in his journal. His neighbor at 13 Blinman St. was his older brother, Henry Rogers Strickland. The two Strickland brothers married two Rogers sisters. The Rogers family owned both houses. Street names and numbers have changed in this neighborhood, however, and the neighborhood has been renovated.

In the Norwich city hall, New London county census records from July 1860 note that the value of the personal estate of Peter Strickland, seaman, age twenty-three, was \$500. The same census sheet includes an item on his father, Peter Rogers Strickland: farmer, age fifty-five, value of real estate \$2,500, value of personal estate \$2,700; and an item on his mother, stating that Laura Strickland, housekeeper, was age fifty-one. In the younger Peter Strickland, we have the son of moderately well off parents who leaves the family farm.

I visited the town hall in Montville, Connecticut, where Peter Strickland was born. I found nothing on my Peter Strickland, but by reading through local school committee minutes, I did discover that his father was a member of the Montville school committee in 1851 and 1859. That is important, for it reveals something about the Stricklands' values. I would recall this family interest in education when I later read letters Peter Strickland wrote to his son in the 1870s on the importance of a good education.

Continuing my pursuit of Strickland material in Massachusetts, I traveled to the Peabody Essex Institute in Salem. Its Phillips Library had a copy of Peter Strickland's book, *A Voice from the Deep*,⁵ in its original gilt-stamped binding, but nothing else on him. However, I found the records of sea captains out of

Salem in the 1840s and 1850s on their trading in West Africa. These records provided helpful context for Strickland's later experiences in West Africa. Sea captains from Salem frequented mainly British colonies, while Strickland concentrated on the French colony of Senegal and, to some extent, on the Portuguese colony of Bissau (now Guinea Bissau).

Another mystery in following the Strickland story is that no identifiable family possessions appear to have survived. In his journal entries, the consul relates how he had his houseboy pack up crate upon crate of artifacts from Africa. In particular, he mentioned six ostrich eggs and a stuffed crocodile, bracelets and mounted lions' teeth, and lion and leopard skins. He also refers to three-quarters of a ton of books from his personal library shipped back to Boston. Where are these personal belongings?

From Suffolk County in Boston, I purchased copies of Peter Strickland's will and that of his daughter Mary. The beneficiaries listed in the latter will are New London families. I have attempted to contact their descendants. While Strickland kept his personal possessions in Boston, he remained emotionally attached to his New London roots.

I visited the family house on Neponset Avenue in Dorchester, Massachusetts, wondering whether some might not still be stashed away in the attic. The front and back doors were locked, the garden overgrown. The mail carrier divulged that a Catholic nun had lived in the house but had died, and that the house had remained unoccupied for many months.

I inquired of the Delaware and Mystic libraries how they came to acquire the Strickland papers. Delaware bought the Strickland materials from Boston's Edward Morrill & Son, Rare and Scholarly

Books & Prints in 1956. Mystic purchased its collection in 1966 from Goodspeed's Books of Boston. It is common for collections to be split up in this fashion. Could there be another lot of Strickland materials somewhere, unaccounted for?

Strickland's correspondence during retirement years mentions family photos his daughter Mary took, which were sent to Mr. Claude Potin, a close friend and neighbor on the Island of Gorée. When I visited Senegal, I arranged a meeting in Dakar with six Potin grandchildren, who admitted that they had nothing from their grandfather's possessions with the exception of one portrait of him. Alas, I was following a Strickland trail that was a century old.

At the time that Peter Strickland lived on Gorée Island, serving as consul as well as merchant, Senegal was a French colony. Strickland wrote many letters to the French authorities, as well as to French business associates and personal friends. Strickland's written French was atrocious. He had received no training in the French language in the United States before his posting to Senegal and apparently did little, outside of some everyday practice, to improve his written French while living abroad.

When Senegal became independent in 1960, the departing French colonial authorities left many archives behind. In Dakar, to my great pleasure, I came across a few original letters Strickland handwrote on U.S. consular stationery. Two are reproduced in this book.

During several visits to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, Maryland, I discovered a major treasure trove: besides microfilmed nine hundred pages of Strickland dispatches, I came upon sixteen volumes comprising

1,850 pages of consular records, many written in Strickland's hand. One volume gives the complete list of fees the consulate charged during more than twenty years. Others include return messages from the State Department to Strickland, department instructions to the consul, invoices, and a list of all American vessels docking in Senegal. In an album on the Sierra Leone shelf, I even located a misfiled envelope with an original letter written by Strickland in 1901. The letter, on Gorée-Dakar consulate stationery, was addressed to a ship captain whose vessel was grounded off the coast.

A challenge in writing this biography is that, although we know what Peter Strickland thought of many events and people during his journey through life, we are unable to balance his views with the perceptions of those who knew him. I had hoped to find a copy of the eulogy read by Reverend J. Beveridge Lee, D.D., in 1921 at his gravesite by visiting the Second Congregational Church in New London. However, the church said its records do not contain eulogies going back to the 1920s. There has not been a family repository for his papers since his daughter died in 1945.

Three short quotations assert claims to fame for Strickland's long, well-documented, and remarkable life. In 1881, he wrote from Senegal to a business associate in Boston, "There is probably at the present time no living American who knows as much about this Coast trade as myself."⁶ Trade historians will find in Strickland's journal and correspondence much detailed description of African commerce.

In 1898, Strickland wrote in his journal, "I have crossed the Atlantic more than a hundred times in charge of a vessel."⁷ Maritime historians could add

Strickland's name to a list of other captains who could boast as much.

In the same year, he wrote to a friend, "Your humble servant is the only American that I know of between the Straits of Gibraltar and Sierra Leone."⁸ Strickland was one lonely American toiling in an expanse of territory 1,500 miles long.

The chapters in this book follow Strickland's life chronologically, from "Child of New London" to "Retiree in Dorchester." In between are four chapters that focus on his sea voyages and African stays. Because Strickland pursued more than one career at a time, some overlap occurs during this chronological progression. Some readers may find the level of detail in the Gorée chapter generous, but I have tried to compensate for the dearth of available written accounts of life on this island. As a retiree, Strickland had more time to devote to his journal. A final chapter sums up the Strickland story and highlights his contributions. To give readers a sense of Captain Strickland's routes from the United States to Africa and back and an understanding of the West African territories where he traded, two maps are included in the next section.

Reading Strickland's elegant handwritten journal, dispatches, and letters is a pleasure for the eyes. One loves to follow the flourishes with which he ornamented the "D" of Dakar, the "G" of Gorée, and the "H" of Honorable.

Some of Strickland's expressions are amusingly pithy. As a young sailor, he met American consuls "never burdened with honesty." On Gorée Island during the rainy season, his income from American ships paying port fees amounted to a "beggarly pittance." In Dorchester, he bought a vacuum cleaner

from an “oily-tongued agent.” In retirement, he “spent the day existing.”

The more I read and enjoyed Strickland’s writing, the more I felt that his biography should feature his prose. The reader will therefore find liberal selections of quoted material. Strickland’s style is typical of his era for its lack of punctuation, variant spellings, and frequent capitalization of important words in mid-sentence. I have retained his original usages. For a lad who left school at age fifteen, he developed an engagingly expressive style.

Concerned that he had written his early journals on cheap paper and in leaky ships, Strickland in 1913 and 1914 devoted months of his retirement to recopying them. In one album, the year marked at the top of each page suddenly switches from 1857 to 1914. Inadvertently, he had written the year in which he was recopying rather than the year of the initial entry.

Did Strickland take advantage of his rewrite to alter his earlier versions of events? He claims that his major change was rectifying dates. It took him up to a month to redo one year’s worth of entries, a major activity for a seventy-seven-year-old. He admits to delight in reliving early episodes in his life. He is especially glad to achieve uniformity in the size and appearance of his new journal albums, 8 x 11 inch hard-backed volumes purchased at a stationer’s in Boston. Each album generally contains two hundred or four hundred prenumbered pages, making it easy to track and find the dated entries. How nice it would be if this first biography of Peter Strickland led to the discovery of some of his missing journal albums.