FROM URIAH P. LEVY

Respected Sir

New York Feby. 27' 1847

I perceive that a Bill appropriating five hundred thousand dollars for the relief of the famishing Poor of Irland & Scotland, under your directions to be transported in a National Vessel, will become a Law. I therefore Very respectfully Solicit as a great favour that you will order me to that command; Having already some days past intimated to the Irish Committe my willingness to devote All My Pay during the performance of this Service in Aid of the benevolent object in View. I have wrote the Secy of the Navy on the Subject and beg you to advocate my application.

U P Levy

ALS. DLC–JKP. Addressed to Washington City.

1. Levy (1792–1862) became, in 1860, the first Jewish American to achieve the naval rank of commodore. In earlier years the target of widespread anti-Semitism that then plagued the navy, Levy was court martialed six times, demoted from the rank of captain, and twice dismissed from the service; in both cases, he was soon reinstated. Levy’s opposition to what he regarded as excessively harsh punishment for sailors led Congress in 1862 to outlaw the practice of flogging aboard naval ships.

2. On February 27, 1847, the Senate passed a bill offering relief to the famine victims of Ireland and Scotland. The famine had been caused by the potato blight then ravaging those two countries. The House failed to act on the measure, which would have appropriated $500,000 for relief efforts. In his diary entry of March 2, however, Polk indicated that even if the effort had won House approval, he would have vetoed it, believing the use of public funds to support
charities to be unconstitutional. No reply from Polk to this letter has been found, but Levy apparently did not receive the command he sought. Nor, apparently, did Levy sail aboard either of the two naval relief ships dispatched in March 1847 to Ireland with privately donated supplies.

3. Levy presumably refers to the Irish famine relief committee of New York City. By 1846 such committees, coordinating their charitable activities with the Society of Friends’ Central Relief Committee in Dublin, had been established in numerous U.S. cities.

4. A Virginia native, John Y. Mason (1799–1859) became secretary of the navy in 1846 after George Bancroft resigned that office to become minister to the United Kingdom. Previously, Mason had served as congressman from Virginia, 1831–37; U.S. judge for the Eastern District of Virginia, 1837–44; secretary of the navy, 1844–45; and U.S. attorney general, 1845–46.