2-1-1989

The Caleb Cushing Papers and Other China Trade Materials at the Library of Congress

Jacques M. Downs

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol1989/iss86/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of East Asian Libraries by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The following four articles form a symposium locating and describing collections of Old China Trade documents in the Mid-Atlantic region. The three papers and the discussion of them were presented at the seventeenth annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the Association for Asian Studies held October 21-23, 1988 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The panel, entitled "The Celestial Empire and the Early American Republic, 1784-1844: Old China Trade Documents in the Mid-Atlantic States Region," was chaired by Frank J. Shulman, who has organized eleven similar panels previously. Many of the papers of these earlier panels have already appeared here in the Bulletin. We are happy to add these papers to them.

--Editor

THE CALEB CUSHING PAPERS
AND OTHER CHINA TRADE MATERIALS
AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Jacques M. Downs
University of New England, Biddeford, Maine

All scholars are aware that our greatest and best-financed library has the largest collection of manuscripts in this country, if not in the hemisphere. For the China trade, it is one of the nation's best, though the holdings are restricted for the most part to a few collections. I shall cover four: the Caleb Cushing Papers, the John R. Latimer Papers, the Low-Mills Family Papers, and the so-called Russell and Company Papers. Each is a substantial collection, and--one of the benefits of being located in Washington--each is supplemented by other facilities, notably the book holdings of the Library of Congress across the street and the official records in the National Archives, about ten blocks away--a nice walk and good exercise for a sedentary historian.

The Cushing Papers, by far the largest of the four, illustrates the point made above nicely. Cushing was our first commissioner to China, who went to Canton in 1843 and 1844 to negotiate the first Sino-American treaty. His papers contain the drafts of his despatches to the Department of State, showing what Cushing was thinking while he wrote. The finished despatches are in the Archives, of course, on microfilm (Group 92, reels 2 and 3, available for purchase at $20 a reel). The Papers also contain the memos to Commodore Foxhall A. Parker, commander of the East India Squadron, and Cushing's source of both transportation and intimidation (always an element in dealing with non-Western powers in those days). Parker, of course, reported to the Secretary of the Navy. His letters and reports are also at the Archives, in the Naval Records (East India Squadron Letters and Naval Letters).

The Cushing Papers make up 190 shelf-feet of records, about 120,000 individual items. Although the China mission is only a part of this mass, it is a very respectable part.
Cushing was an extraordinary man. His origins and soul were pure Yankee. His father was a Newburyport merchant, and he grew up in the mercantile climate of seaboard Massachusetts. Cushing understood the trade far better than most Americans or even most politicians. He knew personally many China merchants and a few missionaries. He understood international banking and must have been aware of the function of opium in balancing East-West payments. One of the most learned New Englanders in public life, Cushing had a first-rate mind, but he was often in opposition to the majority opinion of his section. He was a keen observer and was methodical in everything he did (except in keeping a diary, unfortunately; he had kept one in his youth, but the entries he made in it were sporadic). He kept all his documents—articles, speeches, newspaper clippings, and messages from other people in English, Portuguese, French, Chinese, and Manchu. He even included a Chinese copy of the Treaty of Wanghia. He wrote and talked to people both at home and in Macao, and often kept notes on his conversations. Indeed, except for the matter of the lack of diaries, Cushing is as ideal a chronicler and analyst of events as an historian could wish for. He was also very orderly, and his papers are easy to use.

He was in Congress when the China mission was first proposed. It was Representative Cushing who called for the publication of the State Department’s records and then called again when he discovered that the Department had not provided them all. He studied the problem as thoroughly as he could before he left the United States. He also ordered books and documents sent after him, for his use in China.

Cushing set sail in the first week of August 1843 and arrived back in Washington in January 1845, though his despatches continue to March 22 of that year (108 in all). He numbered them, indexed them by date and principal subject discussed. Aboard ship Cushing continued his preparation. He made an attempt to learn Chinese (he was a polyglot), but decided he did not have enough time, so he attempted Manchu while he was at Macao.

On the outward voyage he passed through the Near East where he observed Muslim culture and law very closely. Very early he had perceived that the problem of American personal security in China would probably be solved by the application of extraterritoriality. Thus, Cushing showed particular interest in how European extraterritoriality worked in the Turkish dominions. Like the Manchus, the Turks were resident conquerors. Extraterritoriality was a means of attracting Frankish merchants to the Turks’ Arab possessions. It implied nothing about Turkish law; if it demeaned anyone, it demeaned the Arabs. Perhaps, thought Cushing, the Manchus would react similarly. Indeed, extraterritoriality had been recognized by the Treaty of Nanking, but the British and Portuguese relied on their colonies in the area for enforcement. The U.S., without a Macao or a Hong Kong, would have to define meanings and procedures much more carefully.

As the representative of a Whig administration headed by a slaveholder, Cushing also was very interested in the problem of race relations in India. During the voyage out and back he formulated a consistent philosophy of race relations which explained and even justified American Negro slavery on the same basis as extraterritoriality in China. Cushing’s curiosity and imagination were boundless and continually active. He wrote well, and his theories are well-informed, carefully argued, and perversely brilliant. While Cushing was in China, John C. Calhoun became Secretary of State. If he read Cushing’s despatches, he must have found Cushing’s original thinking very congenial.
Cushing's retinue included George R. West, an artist whose drawings and watercolors provide a graphic supplement to the mission. Cushing did some sketching himself, mostly of India and the Near East.

The finding aid for these papers is well done and very useful. Three areas of the collection are important to persons interested in China:

- **General Correspondence**, containers #37-47,
- **Special file**, containers #163-167, and
- **Subject file**, containers #216-222.

Moreover, at the back of a number of boxes there is undated material that is sometimes quite useful. One finds all kinds of miscellaneous data: lists of resident American traders, extracts from the *Peking Gazette*, tables of organization, lists of Portuguese personalities, book lists, official documents of all kinds, notes on Russian trade with China, a cure for dysentery used by the American naval agent at Hong Kong, and any number of other interesting items.

While Cushing waited at Macao for the arrival of the imperial commissioner, he corresponded with various people at Canton, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. He had two secretaries who were both American missionaries in China, Dr. Peter Parker (MD) and Dr. Elijah C. Bridgman (DD). Parker's Chinese was not very good, but his connections were useful. As a physician he had treated commoners, Hong merchants, and officials; Chinese of all ranks consulted him. Parker also advised Cushing on matters of protocol and strategy. Bridgman was a better sinologist, though not so close to the American envoy. Cushing was a careful man. He had both secretaries translate each Chinese document separately. He also numbered the characters in some documents to be sure of his references.

For anyone interested in the beginning of official American relations with China or of the influence of the China trade on official attitudes, this collection is critical.

---

**The John Richardson Latimer Papers**

The second largest and probably the richest of the four collection is the Latimer Papers. John R. Latimer was born in Wilmington in 1793, but at an early age he moved to Philadelphia and became a merchant. Following the usual pattern of young men in the trade, he began as a clerk and moved up to become a supercargo. In this capacity, he went to China shortly after the War of 1812 and by the time he settled there as a commission merchant in 1824, he had made at least five voyages to Canton. From 1824 until his departure with a fortune in 1833, he carried on a brisk agency business, filling orders from abroad, selling goods for his correspondents and doing business on his own account.

He is most important for his commerce in the forbidden article of opium. In the mid-1920s he formed an association with his fellow Philadelphian, Benjamin Chew Wilcocks, who seems to have been the pioneer both in the Turkish opium commerce and in the drug trade from British India. He was a very versatile, imaginative man with talents deserving use in a better cause than the illegal narcotics traffic. Unfortunately, Wilcocks is probably best known by China trade buffs as the American for whom the famous Hong merchant, Houqua, forgave a huge debt so that Wilcocks could go home a rich man. This magnificent act of generosity shocked Wilcocks so greatly that, according to
Latimer, it disordered his mind. Be that as it may, Wilcocks wrote enormous and frequently very informative letters to Latimer, sometimes thirty to forty pages in length.

This connection with Wilcocks was instrumental in giving Latimer the opportunity to make a fortune in nine short years and then to retire. Latimer’s records are perhaps the best single record extant of the American middleman trade in opium—at least for the late 1820s and early 1830s. Latimer’s records are voluminous. He seems to have saved everything. His own letters include not only trade data but comments on Chinese customs, art, personalities, literary criticism, gossip, news of the foreign community in the area, personal piques, and political prejudices. He was temperamentally a Federalist, but having been born too late, he had to be content with being a conservative Northern Whig. He was constantly coming and going among the hongs at Canton. The Cantonese dubbed him "The Gong," presumably for that reason.

He wrote and received letters from his cousin, James Latimer (his American agent), Matthew C. Ralston (Philadelphia), Smith and Nicoll (New York, for whom he had gone out as an agent), Hormuzjee Dorabjee (Bombay), Nathan Dunn (Philadelphia), Russell and Sturgis (Manila), John P. Cushing (Boston), Hugh Matheson (Calcutta), and many others.

The collection covers about fifteen linear feet of shelf-space containing forty-one boxes and some loose volumes. Although they are invaluable, the Latimer Papers are particularly difficult to use. They were given to the Library under restrictions that limited what the user might write concerning Latimer’s role in the opium trade. Although those restrictions no longer apply, they may have been the source of the collection’s disorganization. There were at least three different, substantial accessions. Each was organized separately and they have never been coordinated. Series are often broken; various parts are found in different accessions. The finding aid is downright confusing. Anyone who does not want to exhaust him/herself in frustration would be well advised to use the last few pages of the finding aid, Appendix B, which gives a list of all the volumes, letters, memos, and other documents in the collection. This is especially important in locating letter books. I would stress that, although Appendix B is the only reliable part of the finding aid, it is only a rough list.

An example will not suffice, but space does not permit a more lengthy complaint, nor would it be very helpful. There is a file of Benjamin C. Wilcocks letters, but other Wilcocks letters and business documents are found in a number of other files as well. Of course, the documents refer to each other and it is the devil’s own task to trace them. To make matters worse, John Latimer allowed his letter books to overlap. One letter-book will conclude after the next has already begun. Why he followed this irritating practice is a mystery, but it does not make things easy for a twentieth-century historian.

The correspondence begins in earnest in 1827, swells in size in 1828 and 1829. Wilcocks landed at Gravesend on April 28, 1827 and thereafter the number of letters increases dramatically, especially from Wilcocks and from India (concerning particularly opium business from British and Parsee merchants). The correspondence continues through 1833, when Latimer left China. In the last few years, Latimer’s own trade increased rather dramatically, as he shipped his fortune home in China goods. Occasionally he also shipped for Chinese merchants.

Besides the letter books, the correspondence, the business papers, and books, a search through containers marked "Promiscuous Papers" can be rewarding. They contain such items as tables of opium imports to China from 1816 to 1831, the consumption of Indian opium in China over the same period, notes on how to use opium, and much more.
Like Cushing, Latimer kept a quantity of oddments which provide much information. Indeed, he saved so much that it is sometimes hard to believe that he was not a New Englander.

Finally, and, perhaps, most confusingly, this is not the only Latimer collection. The University of Delaware has a set of papers presumably based on James Latimer's papers. For several years, the University photographed much material from the Library of Congress's collection. One would expect, therefore, that the Delaware collection might be larger and, one hopes, better organized.

The Low - Mills Family Papers

This is a relatively small collection, completely unlike either of the two previous ones. It takes up only eight feet of shelf space—approximately 4,000 items. Generally, the Papers were generated by Abiel Abbot Low; his sister, Harriet Low Hilliard; their brother, Edward Allen Low, and Mary Hilliard Loines.

The East Asia material is separated from the rest, a condition which makes the collection very easy to use. Some of the early material is in miserable photostat, but most is quite legible. Certainly the most valuable item in the collection is the nine-volume journal kept by Harriet Low (in Boxes #13 and 14). Harriet went to China with her aunt and her uncle, William H. Low, who had become a partner in Russell and Company, Canton, replacing Philip Ammidon. At the time of her departure, Harriet had just turned twenty years of age. She was a very spritely, flirtatious, active young woman. These qualities, added to the fact that American women, especially pretty, single ones, were a rare commodity in China, made her much sought after by the lonely China traders on their occasional visits to Macao, where the Low ladies lived for nearly four years.

Although one volume is missing, the journal provides an extraordinarily complete picture of the expatriate community at Canton, the outside anchorages, and Macao from September 1829 to November 1833. The journal was written as a more or less continuous letter to a sister who remained home in Salem. Harriet thoroughly enjoyed being the center of attention and commented frankly and extensively on the character, appearance, and reputation of every trader in China at the time, as well as on the Chinese merchants with whom they dealt. She includes all kinds of personal remarks, her reactions to everything, her feelings about race, love, customs, religion, and woman's role in China and America. In November 1830 Harriet and her aunt joined the family of the chief supercargo of the British East India Company's factory in visiting Canton itself—a major violation of the "Eight Regulations" for the governance of foreigners in the Celestial Empire.

The journal is also available in typescript both at the Library and at the Peabody Museum in Salem. Arthur W. Hummel, author of *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), has written a lengthy addendum to the journal in the form of extended footnotes. The whole—journal and footnotes—richly deserves publication.
The journal has been the source for two books: *My Mother's Journal* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1900) edited by Katherine Hilliard and *The China Trade Post-Bag of the Seth Low Family* (Manchester, ME: Falmouth Publishing House, 1953) by Elma Loines. As the finding aid puts it, these three works (but more particularly the journal)

illustrate the social, political, and military conditions in that area during the second quarter of the 19th century. The attitudes of traders toward the Chinese are particularly well documented.

There are also letters, a few business papers, some useful clippings, and other documents among the papers, but Harriet Low's Journal is the jewel of the collection. Box #21, entitled "Miscellany" contains a few items of interest, particularly on A. A. Low, a Russell and Company partner, who founded the major shipping firm, A. A. Low and Brother, after returning from China. He was one of the leading mercantile lights of New York later in the century, serving for some time as President of the New York Chamber of Commerce. Indeed, it was he who suggested that the word "commerce" in the organization's title be extended to include all kinds of business, including manufacturing.

**The Russell and Company Papers**

A collection that prematurely draws the attention of anyone interested in the old China trade is the Russell and Company Papers. Researchers so attracted are often disappointed because the collection is misnamed. It should be entitled the "Samuel Russell Papers." To be sure, there is material on Russell and Company, but it is mostly correspondence from the Russell and Company partners in Canton to Samuel Russell in Middletown, Connecticut. There are no Russell and Company papers that I know of. I suspect the firm's business records were destroyed, but I hope I am wrong.

Samuel Russell went to China in 1819 as the Canton partner of a new firm--Samuel Russell and Company (not to be confused with Russell and Company). In the United States, there were several more partners: Edward Carrington and Company, Cyrus Butler, and Benjamin and Thomas C. Hoppin, all of Providence. Russell kept up his end of the bargain, despite flagging interest on the part of the Providence partners, until 1824. In that year the agreement expired and Russell formed a new concern, Russell and Company, taking as his partner Philip Ammidon, agent of the Browns of Providence.

Seven years later this little firm was to become the greatest American house on the China coast. In 1831 it swallowed Perkins and Company, then the most prestigious concern in China, headed by the redoubtable John Perkins Cushing. Perkins and Company was the Canton representative of the Boston Concern, a group of Boston families allied through blood, trade interests, and, eventually, politics. Perkins and Company did business mostly for the allied families, whereas Russell and Company was exclusively a commission and agency house; it did no business on its own account. One of the conditions of the merger was the designation of one Canton member of Russell and Company as the agent of the Boston Concern. To be sure, there was some conflict of interest at first and, in the early years, some correspondents complained and even switched to other agencies, but Russell and Company soon overcame the difficulty, and its reputation for competence and attention to its correspondents' business was rarely impugned. Indeed, its consistent refusal to ship on its own account gave it a competitive advantage over the other American concerns in China.
Russell and Cushing both sailed for home immediately after the union was established. Augustine Heard and especially William H. Low, the two Canton partners, wrote Russell regularly and fully. Occasionally, one of the younger Forbeses, Cushing's nephews, would also write (Robert Bennet and his ship, the \textit{Lintin}, remained at the outside anchorages, selling opium for the firm, Russell and Company, and John Murray was in the countinghouse as an "assistant" in line for promotion to partnership. In this position he acted as the English amanuensis for Houqua.) Later, Joseph Coolidge and John C. Green, partners in the firm who were admitted later, wrote Russell as well. It is this correspondence and the Samuel Russell and Company books, apparently, that induced some sleepy archivist, years ago, to name the collection "the Russell and Company Papers."

Russell remained a member of the firm until 1836. Thereafter, the letters taper off and eventually stop altogether. Thus the bulk of the collection consists of the business records of the earlier company, and letters from Russell and Company partners (and others) in Canton, and the later business of Samuel Russell. As with the other collections, is there considerable miscellaneous data here and there. In folder #1 of the Financial Records, for example, there is a statement of the consumption and value of Indian opium in China from 1816 to 1829--vital years in the expansion of the trade. Also in the accounts current, there is data on Russell's shipments for various Hong merchants.

It is not a large collection--some six linear feet, about 3,900 items in all, including letters, letter books of Samuel Russell and Company, and other business records. There is much material on the American trade and residents at Canton from 1818 to 1836 and some on Chinese merchants. Russell was particularly interested in the importation of Indian opium, a trade for which his firm was the leading American agent, selling for British and Parsee firms in India. With the absorption of Perkins and Company, Russell and Company became the leading purveyor of Turkish opium as well. Perkins and Company, and later Russell and Company, was the ally and agent of Houqua, the greatest of the Hong merchants. By the way, we badly need a study of this important and immensely rich merchant. For this project, the so-called Russell and Company Papers will be one of the major American sources of information.

The Library of Congress is of course more than a research facility for the Congress. It is our national library; therefore, a bona fide researcher needs only to identify him/herself to use the manuscripts. One signs in on arrival. The Manuscript Division--a mild misnomer; it probably should be called the Documents Division--is in the James Madison Building, across Independence Avenue from the main building. It is open from 8:30 to 5:00 weekdays and Saturday. There is a good photoduplication service, though one may have to wait two to three months for one's copies. At one side of the reading room stands a bank of copying machines (ten cents per copy, if you do it yourself). The people at the desk are knowledgeable, intelligent, and very helpful. The manuscript historian in charge of the early national period collections is John McDonough who has been there since 1961. He is most accommodating, is available on the premises, and he can be very useful with both information on the collections and in suggesting where one might look for additional data.

Unlike caretakers in smaller, less affluent institutions, the Library of Congress staff understands historical research and provides every facility to the researcher. Working there, one is made very comfortable and can make swift progress with a minimum of irrelevant distraction.