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Cargo Manifests and Custom Records from American China Trade Vessels Bound for the Port of Philadelphia 1790-1840

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For most Americans, the China trade holds the mystique of the faraway, the exotic, and the unreal. It has been perceived as a trade benefitting a well-to-do clientele. Cyphered Chinese export porcelain, exquisite silks, and ebony and ivory inlaid furniture were the objects associated with such commerce. Only very recently has there been some consideration of Chinese objects for the middle-class consumer. The main purpose of my study is to further this investigation and to extend what we know about Chinese objects available in the early 19th-century open market.

Ship manifest records from Philadelphia located in the U.S. National Archives were the primary documents which assisted me in the study of import goods available to the public. The manifests were ship records of cargo used for custom purposes. The custom officer developed the list as the goods were unloaded at the point of entry. This list assisted in the determination of the item's tax. Some objects were free of duty, while others were charged an ad valorem tax, a fixed percentage of the goods' value. The detail included in these manifests fluctuated as a result of changing custom requirements and the care exercised by the custom officer. Most manifests recorded data on the ship's owner, where the ship was built, the ship's tonnage, the names of consignees, the commander of the vessel, notices of sailors conscripted by the British before the War of 1812, and the ship's destinations and port of entry.

The information significant for my study was the listing of Chinese import goods. Because the Canton manifests were scattered throughout all incoming ship manifests, it was necessary to locate each Canton manifest in the packet for each year. As I went through the manifests, I recorded thirty-three material culture objects I had defined. Those included chinaware, fans, toys, fireworks, matting, baskets, clothing, and foodstuffs. Each object category had its own sheet listing where I noted the name of the ship on which it came, the date of entry into the Port of Philadelphia, descriptive material on the object, the number of items, and the consignees. Later, I compiled this information by year for 190 ship manifests to determine the fluctuation of Chinese import goods through the Philadelphia port. This, combined with newspaper advertisements and other documents, gave me a sense of how great was the American China trade in this particular area.

Often the manifests provided specific descriptions of articles. For example, Chinese buttons were defined as made of gilt, pearl, or glass. Chinese fans were described as "fine glazed," painted, feather, or bamboo. Descriptions enabled me to ascertain subsets of object categories. Joss sticks, canton crackers, and sky rockets were all found to be types of fireworks. Additionally, the method of packing the articles was often provided. Chinaware, for example, was exported to America in boxes, tubs, chests, packages, sets, bales, cases, baskets, and straws. Cassia, a spice with a cinnamon flavor, was sent in mats, bundles, boxes, and packages. The various packing methods made it challenging to document the amount of goods imported. It was necessary to determine
How much each specific container held and translate that into a uniform quantity. The figures compiled from the manifests showed that vast quantities of various import materials were available. For example, in 1834, 7,000 rolls of straw floor matting (each roll containing 50 mats) came into the Philadelphia port. From 1790 to 1840, 1,712,150 floor mats were available to Philadelphians.

Many other opportunities exist for statistical and research analysis of the manifests. Particularly interesting would be the evaluation of the relationships between consignees and the objects imported. One could compare a ten-year period of New York, Boston, Charleston, and Philadelphia manifests from Canton. A relationship might also be found between the ship's tonnage and the vessel's cargo. Ships' names, the imagery they suggest, and the connotations they evoke regarding the China trade might be explored. Change in the length of time a ship could make a complete voyage to Canton and begin again is also observable in this study.

The U.S. National Archives holds the largest collection of American ship manifests. Forrest R. Holdcamper's finding aid, Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Bureau of Customs, which is categorized geographically, provided an overview of this record group 36. His information told me that the New York and Boston manifest records were incomplete for this period of the early China trade, yet the port of Philadelphia manifests were available for the entire fifty-six years. The sixteen volumes and unbound papers of the Philadelphia inward and outward foreign and coastwise manifests, as noted by Holdcamper, contained fewer volumes and more numerous unbound papers.

Though the Archives' manifest collection is the most extensive in the United States, it is not complete. I found several references in the Philadelphia newspaper advertisements to additional ships which are not accounted for in this collection. Likely they have been lost in the transfer of records or I have overlooked them in the massive amount of information reviewed.

Most of the manifests are still housed in their original folders; however, the Archives is slowly transferring the manifest collection to acid-free boxes. When this process is complete they will know the cubic feet that this collection comprises. Many of the manifests are in such poor condition that they crumble in the process of unfolding them. Unfortunately, there is no provision in the current Archives plan for microfilming or preserving them.

There are several other sources of information that provided valuable clues on the Chinese import trade. I found that the records of the "Philadelphia Records of Imports 1825-36 and 1844-49", no. 1080 within record group 36 were of great interest. Still bound in their original cords, these two volumes present the type and amount of goods entering the Philadelphia port for each foreign country in chronological and alphabetical order. These documents gave insight on which goods were taxed and provided occasional descriptions of the specific goods as well. Perhaps its most valuable asset was the easy comparison it afforded regarding other countries' imports. For example, Chinese imports coming through Philadelphia in 1826 provided the greatest tax revenues to the

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United States. England was the second highest in that year. Though information such as this was precisely given, the indexes were not easily definable and several headings had no topics.

Another potential avenue for information on imports existed in the "Philadelphia Records of Goods Damaged in Importation 1791-1820" in record group 36. This includes three volumes and two feet of unbound papers. A review of these papers yielded little information. Most claims gave no notice of the origin of goods, and a large portion were claims for damaged cloth from England. A perusal of these papers found no notice of Chinese goods claimed or any ships bound from Canton.

Information on import goods from China into American ports also existed in the National Archives record group 59, General Records of the Department of State. "The Despatches from United States Consuls in Canton 1790-1906" contained both consular officials' comments regarding import and export trade, as well as interesting and useful enclosures. The twenty rolls of microfilm are rich in material up to 1870. After that time all the enclosures were distributed to other departments and are not included in the consular reports. Enclosures included copies of the Canton Registrar, the Canton Press Price Current, and the Canton Press, all English-language newspapers published in Canton containing information on all aspects of the China Trade. Consular comments included statements on the exports to the United States and lists of American ships entering and leaving the Canton port. This information permitted cross referencing of ships entering the American ports at this same period.

The material in this collection, record groups 36 and 59, is located under the judicial and fiscal branch of the National Archives. All requests to review these documents must be made to this branch. Mr. Sherman or Mr. Vanderneedt will assist the researcher in reviewing the needed documents and give suggestions as to their availability. All manifests and consular reports are housed in the Pennsylvania Avenue facility. The Archives is available for researchers from 8:45 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays. The Archives is closed for research on Sunday. I have provided the Archives with the appended chronological list of all American ships carrying Chinese export goods through the Philadelphia port in this time period. It is available in the judicial and fiscal branch.

Ships Bound from Canton to the Port of Philadelphia 1790-1840. Information Obtained at the U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Union, Sampson, 1790; Brothers, 1791 (out of order); Sam Howell Jr., 1792; Sampson, 1794.

Pigou, Atlantic, Delaware, Lady Louisa, 1796.

Pigou, Woodrop Sims, 1797; Woodrop Sims, Delaware, Camilla Roberts, 1799.

Ship Jean, America, New Jersey, Canton, Pennsylvania, 1800.

Camilla Roberts, Rebecca, New Jersey, 1801; Mt. Vernon, Jefferson, 1802.


Ohio Carson, Rousseau, Ploughboy, George Washington, 1804.
Oriental, Bingham, Woodrop Sims, Mt. Vernon, 1805.


Dorothea, Jefferson, Rousseau, Delaware, Reaper, 1807; South Carolina, Fair Trader, Active, Asia, 1808.

Hibernia, Thalia, Asia, Grawler, Pacific Wicks, Dorothea, Susquehanna, 1810.

Atalanta, George, South Carolina, Williamson, 1811; Voltaire, William, Lancaster, 1812; Pacific, Caledonia, 1816.

George Albert, Clothier, Phoenix, Natches, Addison, Pacific, Caledonia, 1817.


Donaldson, Superior, Factor, China Packet, Caledonia, Dorothea, William Savery, 1820.

Phoenix, Addison, Caledonia, 1821; Adriana, Scattergood, Dorothea, Addison, William Savery, 1822.

Caledonia, Columbia, Adriana, Phoenix, Telegraph, Isabella, Benjamin Rush, Pacific, Dorothea, Addison, 1823.


Tabacco Plant, New Jersey, Asia, Isabella, 1827.

Newport, Scattergood, Caledonia, New Jersey, Rebecca Sims, Mary, Asia, 1828.

New Jersey, Isabella, Pacific, 1829; Tabacco Plant, Fanny, Globe, 1830.

Delight, Walter, Fanny, 1831; Atlantic, Mary, Globe, Erie, Pioneer, 1832.

Addison, Walter, Commerce, Globe, 1833; Liberty, Eliza, Brighton, Julia, Hope, Globe, 1834.

Hope, 1835; Liberty, John Gofsler, 1836; Girard, Plymouth, 1837; Chandler Price, 1838; Commerce, 1839.

There is nothing more to the end of 1840.