

American History on Other Continents



On the trail of China traders in Africa and Asia

“In Persuance of an Act of this Commonwealth . . . Pasckal Nelson Smith Esqr. of Boston in the Countij of Suffolk and the Common-wealth Massachusetts maketh oath that the Sloop *Harriett* where of Allen Hallet is at present Master . . . of the Burthen of Thirty-five Tons or there about was built at piscataqua in the Year of Our Lord one Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty Three.” Having copied this as best he could, the Dutch clerk added John Hancock’s John Hancock into the margin; Hancock had been governor of Massachusetts when the *Harriett* set sail.

The *Harriett* was the first American vessel to sail for China, and there were its papers copied and tucked away in The Hague, in the Nationaal Archief, part of the Dutch East India Company records, an enclosure to the daybook sent from Cape Town. And there, improbably, was I. It was a long way to come for just one ship.

Fortunately, there were others. The Cape Colony *dagregisters*, daybooks, opened

up bit by bit: a few ship's papers here, a quarterly list of shipping there; after a month I had put together a surprisingly complete record of American ships in Cape Town sailing to and from China in the 1780s and 1790s.

But the shipping lists told more. American merchants weren't just sailing to China; they were sailing to Mauritius, to India, to Batavia, and to points in between. So I started to follow the ships.

The Dutch national archives are well organized, well run, and thoroughly digitized. It is a stereotype of national efficiency. Everything is catalogued. Documents are brought out within fifteen minutes, order numbers appearing all the while on an illuminated display overhead. I've stood longer at delis.

Other archives are less well endowed, but even the most unlikely of them had more American history than one historian could cover.

The tropical sun made the seat burn. There I was half lost, driving on the left on a moped in a country with French road signs, trying to find a national archive, which, unlike everything else, had no sign. I circled around the industrial park where the archive was improbably said to be located, past the Billabong factory, past the gutter running red with dye, until, next to a warehouse, over a door, I saw a small sign I couldn't quite read from the road: Mauritius National Archives.

Mauritius is an Indian Ocean island about five hundred miles east of Madagascar. It was a French colony until 1810 and British until its independence in the second half of the twentieth century. It remains a developing African success story.

Home in Mauritius was the seaside town of Flic-en-Flac, which boasted a beach popular with European vacationers; numerous holiday villas were going up around town. Most Mauritians lived elsewhere, in settlements near the sugar plantations, which employ a large segment of the population, or in larger, industrial towns upland in the interior, near the archive.

The bus from town—for the moped was impractical for a laptop-paranoid graduate student—made its way up from the beach through the sugar fields, stopping here and there to take on passengers in the cane or to drop folks off at the next market town. I could get off at one such town, make my way down a back road, cross a couple of abandoned soccer fields and catch the back entrance to the industrial park (occasionally guarded by a wayward goat), which I did in an oxford button-down and khakis out of the very graduate-student fear that the archivist would look at me funny if I didn't.

The afternoon bus home was full of schoolchildren and their books, and no matter how many times I saw it, the prospect of a high schooler walking back through the cane with an accounting textbook always made me smile—so too with the government-run clinics in every village. They conjured the sense of a nation going someplace. Mauritius may be poor, but it is a young democracy with

low crime, high literacy, and a government doing its level best to educate its children and improve their lot. When you see government money being spent on clinics and schoolbooks, it's hard to begrudge those rupees not being spent on archives.

The reading room was upstairs past the main desk: a room within the main storage area, lights low and slatted windows open, four wood tables and as many electrical outlets. A woman dressed in a sari came round from the record cage, which in the open floor plan receded back beyond sight. She pointed me to a small bookcase of finding aids, which I spent the next three months going through.

Unlike the Netherlands, Mauritius has limited funds for its archives. Electricity must be bought; plugging in your laptop costs until you get to know the archivist. There are no LED displays for document orders. There is no online catalog. The archive is small but so is the country, and because of that it remains manageable.

The entire archive is housed on a converted factory floor. Most of the other businesses in the building are warehousing firms; pallets and loading docks flank the front. Textile dust occasionally whips up into the air, a respirable fire hazard. Over the course of my stay there I spoke with several readers whose greatest fear was an industrial accident that might combine the Triangle Shirtwaist tragedy with cultural disaster.

Both humidity and bugs were doing their best to make cultural disaster before fire could. To provide some protection to their three-centuries-old volumes, the archivists had boxed the oldest and most loosely bound. While boxing shields books from light or page loss, it also shields them from view and, hence, casual inspection.

Some hadn't been seen since they were boxed, and in the interval worms or insects had made their way in and in their own happy time consumed entire volumes. Some volumes turned out to be little more than cover and binding, others a maddening Swiss cheese of fragmentary layers, the shreds of one page intertwined with the remnants of the next, too fragile to disentangle, too jumbled to read.

Rust was just as bad; the iron in the ink—the gallnut-and-iron-salt blend was as common in colonial Mauritius as in colonial America—had eaten through page after page as it oxidized in the wet air. Not only would it cut through pages, it adhered each page to the next. For a researcher looking for long runs of data, this was troubling.

Perhaps just as maddening was how French officials had recorded their documents. Dutch, British, and American administrators drew up carefully proportioned tables of shipping to show the flow of vessels and to permit voyages to be tallied or thought of as part of a larger trade, often with tax revenues already counted out. Gallic administrators, on the other hand,

recorded each vessel on its own sheet of paper (and subsequently lost many of them). They made little or no attempt to facilitate an accounting of overall trade. There was no printed form for ship arrivals, no one to go to the dockside and count the ships, no single body in charge of tracking trade and ensuring all the forms were saved (there were two, the police and admiralty keeping separate, incomplete compilations of captains' *declarations d'arrivées*, when and if the captain bothered to report to their offices). Only after the British conquest were such records kept with an eye to a long-term, complete, and more-numerate record of trade.

Yet there were always glimmers of hope whenever these prospects made me glum, when the *declarations*—each written out just differently enough to forestall skimming—grew monotonous or when I grew fed up with the whole half-eaten, half-rusted mess.

For one, there was an ice-cream truck. The driver careened through the industrial park in the afternoon heat with a tinny version of “Jingle Bells” coming in and out of range with a sublime torture that made visions of sugar cones dance in our heads. Out we came—archivists, historians and workers—chasing, reverting, happy for sure.

“It’s one of the best archives in the Western Indian Ocean,” my professor had told me. Standing there in the shade with my cone, I wondered if he meant the ice cream.

Fortunately for my research, the gaps in the records were not insurmountable. Other scholars had already mined the French-era data but without comparing them to later, British-era records. So I reviewed my predecessors’ methodology, verified their findings as best I could with what French data survived, and began work in the more fulsome British sources. I felt as though I had pulled original research from the jaws of defeat.

I followed the Americans to other archives as well. The Cape Town Archives Repository in Cape Town, South Africa, is housed in a former prison at the foot of Table Mountain—and with stunningly *unimprisoned* views of the peak from the old prison courtyard. It held a cache of wonderfully preserved (and meticulously organized) shipping tables from the late-Dutch and early British periods. Between the Cape Town and Mauritius records, it became apparent that China traders were not the only Americans to round Africa. Slave ships from East Africa stopped on the long, middle passage to the Caribbean and the United States. The Dutch authorities at the Cape noted, “304 slaven,” of the *Horizon* on its voyage from Mozambique to “America” in 1804.

Whaling and sealing vessels called at the Cape and Mauritius too. American debtors began appearing in South African court records, and American shipping made its way into official Mauritian debates on commercial policy. In each port, American ships proved the most important link to the wider world while it remained in Napoleonic hands. U.S. merchants enmeshed themselves in sundry

local trading ventures: buying ostrich feathers at the Cape (plumage to Europe's fashionable set) in exchange for great wheels of Edam.

But, as every historian has experienced, not every archive yielded treasure. In Macau, the ex-Portuguese port on the China coast through which every China trader passed and the hub to all the trade I was catching at the spokes and rims, I fumbled through every finding aid the good-natured archivists could dredge up. The port may have been central to my research, but precious little shipping data survived.

On another trip, this one to Jakarta, I found data in the Dutch records but had to dig them out without knowing a word of Bahasa Indonesia. Communication was reduced, once I had found the finding aids (which were partly in Dutch), to writing call numbers on a slip of paper and smiling at the archivist until the record appeared.

Such troubles were mild compared to the rewards. But who rightly can claim to be the first to use some new archive? Certainly, I was no "first." Yet digging away for American history in the Indonesian heat or the African winter, surrounded by scholars of local national histories, I felt as though I were still making discoveries. I was perhaps the first early Americanist to cross their threshold; I was certainly committing the oddity of looking for another country's history in their national archive. Sometimes I thought I might be able to contribute to two countries' histories at once. But even that might be a bar too high; if I could make the history of early America just a little more capacious, *that* would be reward enough.

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