

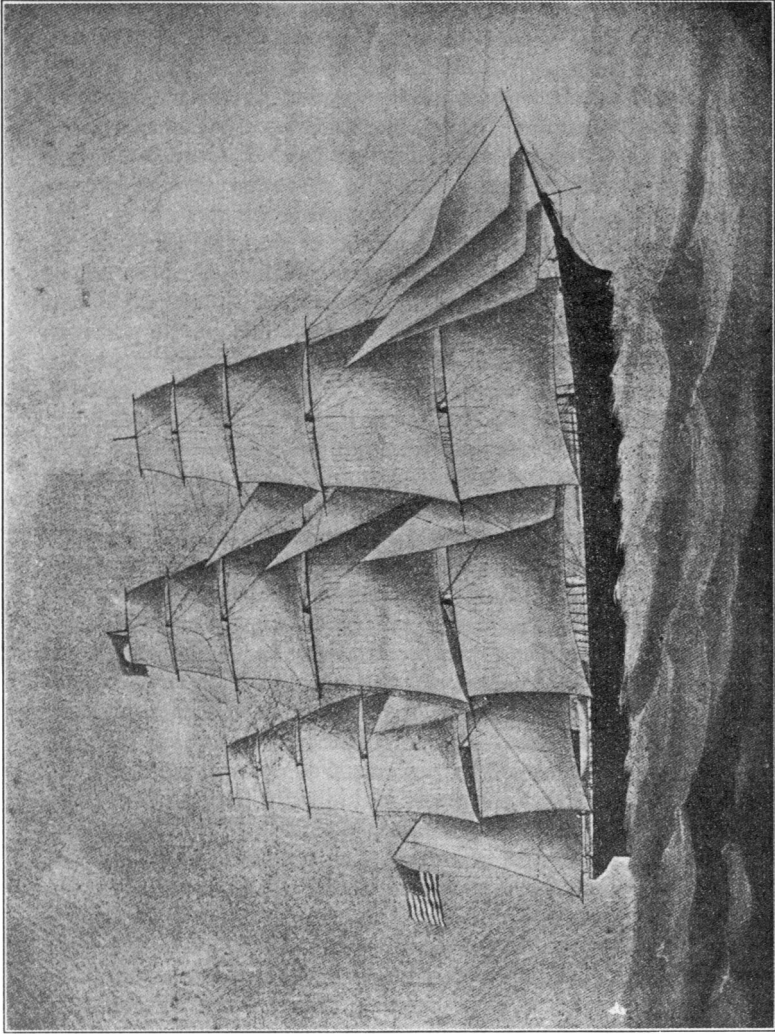
East Indiamen and Clipper Ships

(THE GORDON DEXTER COLLECTION)

A COLLECTION of manuscripts, replete with details which rebuild the picture of foreign commerce in the 1840s and 1850s, has recently been given to The Business Historical Society by Mr. Gordon Dexter, whose father, an officer in most of the companies whose papers make up the collection, preserved the records which have so fully come down to us. It is chiefly composed of the cheques, bills, accounts, contracts and correspondence of William Appleton and Company, and the successor of that firm, Samuel Hooper and Company, merchant shipowners of the type described in the previous article. The story of their rise and fall, as disclosed in the papers, is also a day-to-day section of the history of American shipping from 1840 to 1878, at the height of its fame and prosperity, and in the time of its decline, and the rise of manufacturing to first place. The collection is doubly valuable in that it continues the story of the Israel Thorndike collection, described in the January Bulletin. Thorndike and Appleton were in like business, and their outside interests overlap. The Thorndike papers proper cease abruptly in May, 1809; these begin January, 1840: the former touch upon the Revolutionary War and the causes for the War of 1812; these, upon the Mexican War, Clipper ships, the hectic days of the Gold Rush, and end with the Civil War.

The Appleton Company had many ships, a few of them famous in Massachusetts maritime history. Others, not so famous perhaps, are nevertheless typical of the period. For example, there is an almost complete record of contracts and bills for the building of the "Oxnard" by Waterman and Elwell, Medford, — and "Medford built" connotes the highest standard of shipbuilding — in the '40s, the day of the sturdy East Indiaman. They furnish precise information regarding the size, equipment, and cost of ships at that time — eighty-five years ago. Although the "Oxnard" was not intended to carry passengers, there is a passenger list found among the 1847 papers. The cost of a voyage between Europe and this country ranged from \$60 to \$400 for accommodations far short of our present demands for comfort and luxury.

The following transcription, an extract from one of the letters of the collection, depicts the duties of a ship's Captain:



THE NABOB

The Appletons' ship which won a blue ribbon for a record voyage to China. She was of the "medium clipper" type.
(Reproduced by permission of Charles E. Lauriat Company from "Old Sailing Ships of New England.")

“Our Ship Delhi is now ready for sea and we wish you to take charge of her and proceed to New Orleans, where you will consign her to Mess^{rs}. Israel Whitney & Wm. A. Burnham and deliver to them the inclosed letter. The Ship is to be loaded at New Orleans with a cargo of Lead & Cotton for China, . . . You will proceed from New Orleans to Canton, where the Ship & cargo will be consigned to Mess^r Russell & co whose instructions you will afterwards follow. . . . It will be very important to make all possible dispatch at New Orleans and we hope you will not be detained there more than 10 days — in that case you will have time to go up the China Sea before the change of the Monsoon.

The Ship is well provided with most articles necessary for the voyage. There are 5000^{lbs} of Bread packed in tight casks which is intended for the homeward voyage from China — you will purchase 3000 lbs at New Orleans for the outward passage which may be packed in the usual way in barrells. The water cask should be examined & the hoops driven before the water is filled. The Compasses should also be examined. Fuel is to be provided sufficient for a year’s voyage for which you can take Wood or Coal as you think best. For live stock you will want 8 to 10 Pigs and 2 Doz. Fowle with 10 Bushels of corn for feed. You will probably find our Ship Charlotte at New Orleans and we trust you & Capt^a Gerry will be disposed to assist each other in any way that will promote the interest of the owners of your Ships — but in making any exchanges of articles . . . you must remember that the ownership is different & settle for them as you would with strangers. . . .

As it is the first time you have been master of a Ship, we wish to enjoin upon you the importance of economy in the care of your ship at Sea as well as in Port — we wish her to be provided with every thing necessary for Safety & comfort — but do not wish you to go to any expence for mere show. The Ship should be Kept in good order at all times — this is done by attention with little expence, and in the opinion of those whose judgement would be valuable reflects more credit on yourself & your officers than any expensive ornamenting or display. It is necessary to use every exertion to make dispatch in port and at sea — good passages are often important to the interest of the voyage and increase your reputation as a Ship master. In cases of difficulty from intricate navigation or any other danger, Safety is most important and every thing should give place to prudence, any time lost can be made up as far as possible by exertions where you are safe from dangers.

For your Services as Master of the Ship you are to have \$75 per month & not exceeding five tons priviledge to be filled with your own goods. We shall feel anxious to hear of you[r] departure from New Orleans as a day saved may make the difference of a month in your passage from Java to China, and we trust you will spare no exertions to get away from New Orleans as Speedily as possible. Wishing you a Safe & pleasant voyage & hoping to hear from you whenever opportunities offer to write. We are,

Your friends & Employer
W^m. Appleton & C^o

P. S. Those of your crew who have had but part of a months pay advanced here can receive a month in New Orleans if you can trust them with it & all of them one months pay in China. The first & Second Officer[s] in addition & their 2 months advance have a half pay order.”

The chief business of the companies was buying hides from the Californian and Mexican coast, and rice and teas from China; for these they exchanged a wide variety of cotton goods, and household furniture and hardware. Occasionally they carried coal, luxuries for the gay Californians and Mexicans, and even piece-cut lumber and metal for dwellings and warehouses. Nearly all the Appleton vessels took this course; only one or two of the vessels took other routes, or carried other cargoes. A good deal of trade was carried on with New Orleans; and there is an account of the shipwreck of the “Hamlet,” in January, 1845, enroute from Rio de Janeiro with a cargo of coffee. But for the most part, the ships were built and the voyages were planned, for the Californian coast trade and Chinese ports.

The “Admittance” and the “Barnstable” made California ports repeatedly for hides, just as narrated in Dana’s “Two Years before the Mast,” and, as narrated in that book, a third vessel, usually a barque, was kept out there for coast-wise trade, while the two larger ships plied back and forth from the home port. One of these barques was the “Tasso.” One of her crew threatened the Appleton Company with a law-suit. R. H. Dana was retained as the Company’s attorney. When the facts were sifted, the case was found to amount to very little, for it was disclosed that the sailor had deserted on the California coast, in the general rush for the gold mines, and by common custom was entitled to his wages only if he fulfilled his contract with his ship. The company really dealt quite gener-

ously with him, settling for nearly the full amount of wages for the period he had served, disregarding his broken contract.

Competition for hides was keen, but for three years there was a distressing drouth on the coast of California; before nature had stabilized that condition, and restored trade to the shippers, the Mexican War was on. Again, trade had not regained its former prosperity, when the restlessness caused by the discovery of gold completely demoralized coast trade and shipping. It began in '47, and by 1849-'50, the old, reliable type of sailor, amenable to discipline was almost impossible to find. Sea captains were at their wit's end to get a crew to make a full trip.

A letter from Samuel Hooper about 1849 indicated that he went down to Cape Cod hoping to find among the ancient sailors "with salt in their blood," a crew upon which the company could depend for a complete trip. After the news of the gold rush had fevered the East, sailors would ship for a voyage and desert at the first port on the California coast. One youth wrote his young wife, reassuring her that he was coming back with the ship as he had promised and remarked that he supposed she would rather have him keep his word honorably than desert the ship and come back *wealthy!*

Nevertheless, the competition of trade had to be met, and the advent of the steamer meant quicker coast-wise service. For the long trips around the Horn and over to China, the Clipper was racing before the wind. "A *clipper ship*," says Samuel Eliot Morison, in his "Maritime History of Massachusetts," "was built and rigged with a view to speed, rather than carrying capacity or economy. Although larger, in general, than the older sailing vessels, it was the model and the rig of clipper ships that made them such, not their size. They were sharper in the ends, longer in proportion to their breadth, and more heavily sparred than the full-bodied, bluff-bowed ships of previous, and even later generations. For the clipper ship came all at once, and fled as quickly as she came. There had been clipper schooners and clipper brigs since 1812, the term "clipper" connoting speed and smartness; but only six or eight clipper *ships* had been built before 1850. . . ."

Against these ships, built to cut the waves and carry sail, raced the better of the older generation of vessels, the skill of whose mariners was challenged to the utmost. The "Nabob," under Captain Baxter, was given a blue ribbon for making the trip to China in the fastest record time of any vessel but a clipper ship (July, 1857). A letter in the collection, written to her owners, is full of the pride of

her master. In December, 1862, she was lost off the Philippine Islands in a long, severe storm.

Possibly the most famous ship belonging to this company was the "Living Age," a full clipper ship. She was owned by them only three or four years when she was lost off the Pratas Shoals; although short-lived, she was well enough known to be included in the collection of pictures, "Old Sailing Ships of New England," published by the Lauriat Company, Boston. We have the account of her loss, in brief, matter-of-fact style which presents a vivid picture without the aid of any flourishes of conscious literary style:

"Gentlemen I have the painful duty to inform you of the Total loss of the good Ship Living Age with all her cargo on Pratas Shoal the 1st day of Jan. . . . We left Shanghai on the 27th of Dec. . . . the weather dark and rainy with strong increasing breezes . . . Saw neither Sun Moon or Stars, from the time of leaving until the 3^d of Jan three days after the Ship struck. It then cleared up for a short time and we saw Pratas Is. about 2 miles distant. . . . At 4 A.M. on the 1st of Jan the position of the Ship was in the Lat of the Pratas Shoal 25 miles west of them according to my Judgment At 5 A.M. the Ship going 10½ miles pr hour struck with Tremendous violence on the Reef. It was so dark at the time could not see the Breakers the length of the Ship. The Rudder was instantly unshipped tearing the tiller down through the poop A few seas soon stove in the stern. The Ship fell over in the Larb'd side. The boats were all washed overboard before daylight. As soon as daylight came found the only chance to save our lives was to lighten the Ship forward and force her farther up on the Reef as she was breaking up fast aft. Commenced throwing overboard everything forward from the deck Anchors chains &c cut the Fore rigging the Fore mast fell over which lightened the ship the heavy seas striking aft forced the bow in 9 ft. water Built boat of the bulwarks a Raft of Spars and planks On the 7th of Jan more moderate launched the Boat the Mate and nine men Jumped in pushed through the breakers landed on the Island the same day. . . . They found the Island barren and uninhabited with a well of brackish water on it. We loaded the Raft and Boat with provisions which they got safe to the Island. . . . On the 5th of Feb. an English Bark the Tom Bowlin was cast away about 9 miles distant from the Living Age The Crew was seen to sail away in their long boat the next day. They reached a small Island near Hong Kong where they were attacked by pirates the Capt was seen murdered only two of their number escaped to tell the tale.

A Small Chinese boat drifted on to the Is. we fitted her up the best we could the Mate with four men set sail for Hong Kong on the 15th of Feb which they safely reached on the 17th Her Majestys Steamer was immediately dispatched for us and to look after the Bowlines crew previously a ship passing the Island saw a wreck and people on the Island making Signals of distress in running in she sprung a leak and was obliged to bear up for Manila. On the arrival of the Ship the Capt reported seeing people on the Island. Capt. Munroe of the P & O co; Steamer Shanghae being there and bound to Hong Kong Kindly touched at the Island and took us all on board the 19th of Feb, before getting on board another steamer hove in sight which proved to be the Man of War Steamer sent from Hong Kong. We were treated by Capt Munroe and his Officers with every Kindness in aiding us to get on board from the Island and during our stay on board of the Steamer for which he has the heartfelt gratitude of all our people. We arrived safely at Hong Kong on the 20th Feb Fifty one days after the loss of the Ship.

When I left the Living Age the Tea was washed out as far as the Mizzen Mast the Decks started up and open fore & aft. The Tea wet and spoiled as far as I could ascertain. There were five wrecks in sight from the Living Age. The Island is strewn with pieces of wrecks from one end to the other no doubt many missing vessels have been lost there. . . .

Trusting I may soon see you
I remain your most Obd't Servant"

R. P. Holmes.

Later, the Appleton Company petitioned Secretary of State Marcy to honor Captain Munroe of the rescuing steamer for bravery. Captain Holmes died of tuberculosis, as a result of the exposure.

These letters deal with only one side of the story which the papers present, perhaps the most romantic side, although that may be open to question. In the firms with which these merchants were connected the reasons appear for the general decline of shipping, and the diversion of capital to interior channels, — lands, railroads and manufactures. And the personalities of the men whose enterprise directed these firms lead us to at least one biography of national importance. The Dexter collection, taken with the Thorndike papers, as was suggested in the beginning of this story, gives a very representative picture — and undoubtedly an authentic one — of the development of one phase of American commerce.