

EARLY AMERICAN TRADE ROUTES TO CHINA

Once the colonies gained their independence, American ships began to search the oceans for markets to replace the British colonial markets from which they were now excluded (the West Indies) or in which they were subjected to heavy tax (English ports). Shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the first American ship set off for China with a cargo of ginseng, a root highly prized by the Chinese for its medicinal qualities. Stopping over at Capetown, South Africa, the ship's captain met the captain of a British East India Company vessel returning from China with a cargo of tea. A trade was made and the American ship returned to its home port of Boston, making a profit for its investors and demonstrating the possibility of great profits in the future.

At the beginning of 1784, another ship, *The Empress of China*, left for China. The *Empress* reached Canton at the end of that summer, initiating trade between China and the new republic. The ship began its homeward leg in December and reached New York in May 1785. Five years later fifteen American ships were engaged in the China trade.

Merchants from the major ports (New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Salem) tended to specialize in different kinds of trade. The trading patterns of ships from Boston and Salem are examples of the two general trade routes to China that developed.

The following reading describes the routes taken.

The favorite route of Boston ships took them around the continent of South America and along the western coast. Their ultimate goal was the Canton market, but the type of trade pursued resulted in varying routes through the Pacific. If the Boston vessel was bound for the Northwest Coast for fur, she usually would sail "broad off" Cape Horn, touching the Hawaiian Islands before sailing back in a northeasterly direction for the American coast. If a smuggling voyage was anticipated, the vessel invariably proceeded from port to port along the western coast of South America and upper California. Sometimes a combination smuggling-fur trading voyage was carried out. In this case, nearly every port of the Spanish Main was contacted before the ship sailed to the Hawaiian Islands in preparation for a season of fur trading along the coast. When the cargo was complete, whether it was fur, hides, or specie, the inevitable route to Canton was taken by way of the Hawaiian Islands, through the strait between the Philippines and Formosa, the China Sea, and to Macao at the mouth of the Pearl River in China.

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Salem skippers preferred the eastern approach to the Pacific. The route used by most of these ships took them to Capetown by way of the West Indies or the Cape Verde Islands. From South Africa there was usually a stopover at the Isle of France (Mauritius). Some trading was done along the coast of India and Ceylon, but the usual route from Mauritius took Salem ships on the long trek across the Indian Ocean for a landfall on Java Head, which marked the entrance to the Sunda Straits. After the passage of the Straits, the vessels proceeded to the Philippines, South Sea Islands, or Canton, depending upon the type of voyage.

Generally, all ships used the same route home.

Most American ships returning from Canton followed the Cape of Good Hope route. They were carried south across the South China Sea by the northeasterly monsoons. They then worked their way along the Borneo coast toward the Sunda Straits, usually making a stop at Anjur, Java, for supplies. After clearing the dreaded Strait of Sunda, the long voyage across the Indian Ocean was often broken at Madagascar and Capetown. On the next leg of the journey, Saint Helena Island or Ascension in the South Atlantic were the usual stopping places. After rest and refreshment were obtained, the Yankee trader took departure from these small points of land and “squared away” for Cape Cod.