

Document 4.10: Excerpts from a letter of instructions from the owners of the vessel *Mentor* to Captain John Suter, 1816

According to British law, it was illegal for their colonies to trade with anyone except Great Britain or other British colonies. However, the American Revolution and subsequent Treaty of Paris in 1783 eliminated this restriction. The first merchant vessels from the United States arrived in Guangzhou in 1784.¹

Boston, August 6, 1816

Captain John Sutor²

Dear Sir,

The Ship *Menton* being ready for Sea you will take the command of her and proceed forthwith on the Voyage—having full confidence in your good judgement and long experience, we should not consider it necessary to enter into the details, were it not for the possibility of our being deprived of your services in the course of the Voyage in which unfortunate event it would be proper and necessary that your successor should be made acquainted with our views and wishes.

We agree with you that it is not advisable to touch at the Sandwich Islands³ nor any other place on your outward passage, unless sickness or some other cause should render it necessary. Of this you must be the judge and can soon decide after your arrival in the Pacific Ocean.

Your Ship is equipped and provisioned for a three years' Voyage and you are furnished with a Cargo both for trade with the natives and Russian settlements in that quarter of the Globe. Although they prepared for two Seasons it would be highly beneficial if the

¹ Guangzhou was formerly known as Canton.

² The captain's name was actually spelled Suter.

³ Now known as Hawaii.

Voyage could be accomplished in one, and we think it very possible that this may be the case. If when you arrive on the Coast you think there is a fair probability of your being able to collect, the first Season, both from the Russians and Natives, a quantity of Furs, equal to Three thousand Merchantable Sea Otter Skins, we recommend your finishing your Voyage by all means the first year, if you leave the Coast by the month of December 1817 you will be in time to save the monsoon to Canton and home. It would be a great saving in every point of view if the Voyage could be made in two years and if equal to Three thousand skins are carried to Canton⁴ the Voyage must prove a good one, for we doubt not but Sea Otters will command a good price in Canton next Season. After being a few weeks on the Coast you will be able to judge of the practicability of finishing your business in one Season and your determination on this point will of course govern your subsequent proceedings in the disposition of your Cargo and the prices you may feel willing to pay for Skins. If you see a prospect of getting off in one Season, you will be able to pay a more liberal price for Skins and they secure all the Skins that may be offered. On the contrary should your determine to remain, all possible economy will be necessary in the expenditures both of Cargo and Stores. Your ideas respecting the commencement of your operations on the Coast we think perfectly correct. You cannot do better than to fall in near the Cape St. James and either gain a harbour on the Island or main side, as the wind may be, but we cannot too fully impress on your mind the necessity of being at the Russian settlement in Norfolk Sound early in April. You must bear in mind that nearly half your Cargo is expressly calculated supplying the Russians and much of it cannot be sold at any other place. The only chance of your effecting an advantageous sale to these people is when they are in want of the articles you have. This will unquestionably be the case when you first arrive. But you may be certain that very large quantities of almost every article you have for the Russians will follow you in the course of two months. We believe that Capt. Porter in the *Alert* will go direct to the Russian settlement, as will also Capt. Davis in the Boardman and Popis Ship, knowing these facts we particularly recommend your selling the Russian investment without delay for the most you can obtain, even though the prices should be much less than have heretofore been obtained for such articles. We are fully satisfied that the first sale will be

⁴ Now known as Guangzhou.

the best, let the prices be what they may; this part of your Cargo has been laid in at such low prices, that you can well afford to undersell all those who went before you, but those who follow you will have the same advantage with yourself....

You cannot expect that Seals will bear a very high price in Canton for several years as many Vessels are out in pursuit of them. We think Beaver and Land Otter Skins preferable if to be obtained....

The articles which compose your Russian assortment are probably better than have ever been carried there before, the Rum is not lower than third proof and the Brandy is all fourth, the Wine may want to be fined which can easily be done with a little Isinglass, Milk or Eggs. For the Natives you have the best assortment we have known to have been carried. The Muskets are unequalled by any ever shipped from this Country and will sell very readily. As more of the same kind will undoubtedly follow, we recommend your selling them as expeditiously as possibly without undervaluing them....

Furs of every description as well as Sea Otter Skins are our object as they may be all advantageously disposed of in China. When leaving the Coast it would be well to take a large number of Spars [?]⁵ between Decks, which will find a good market at Canton, in fact no object is too small or too large to merit your attention on a Voyage like the present. We do not intend to confine you by any positive orders. What we have said is rather meant as advice. We leave you at full liberty to pursue any course which you may deem for our interest either by purchasing Furs, by killing them or employ the Ship in any other way, taking care however never to attempt any illicit trade against which your Ship is not insured, although She is against all the usual and ordinary perils of the Voyage. When you arrive at Canton you will find instructions from us for your future government. Should you not you will apply to Messrs Perkins & Company who will assist you in transacting your business then. As full compensation for your services on

⁵ Where the words in the original handwritten document were unclear, the transcribers have added “[?]”.

this Voyage we agree to allow you Seven and a half per Cent of the net Sales in the United States of all Cargo brought home by you or shipped home by your order....

Never neglect an opportunity of writing us by any route, giving an account of your prospects, proceedings, and also any information about trade both with Russians and Natives that you think may be useful.... Give us all the particulars of your trade with the Russians and a list of such articles as will answer best with the quantities that can be sold and the prices they will bring. Also state what sells best among the Natives, inform us whenever you can what other Vessels are doing and what are the prospects for business there in future....

Wishing You a pleasant and prosperous Voyage, we are with esteem your friends,

Bryant & Sturges

Source: Bryant Sturgis to John Suter. 6 August 1816. John Suter papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Transcribed by Liz Nelson and Shirley Huettig Moore.