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Frederic Tudor – Ice King

THE business papers of Frederic Tudor, who for half a century was known throughout the country as the Ice King, have recently been deposited in Baker Library by his grandson, also a Frederic Tudor. These business records comprise the story of one of the most unique business enterprises ever undertaken. The material includes account books, letter books, and unbound letters so absorbing in their interest that it is hard to turn away from them.

Frederic Tudor, born in 1783, belonged to that generation so characterized by undaunted youthful endeavor. His early training was in the counting house of Major William Sullivan. The first letter in the oldest of the letter books was written in 1804 to Major Sullivan on the occasion of Mr. Tudor's withdrawal from his position in the counting house. His plans, he states, are to establish himself as an independent merchant. At this time he was twenty-one. At twenty-three he was launching his ice business.

When one ventures into a new field of business, one must expect to be called upon to solve countless and diverse problems; there are no predecessors who have paved the way by developing the necessary technique. This was exactly the situation in which Frederic Tudor found himself in connection with his gigantic project.

He was forced to study the methods of transporting ice, building ice houses, and preserving ice in the home—all involving technical problems which required engineering knowledge. Many experiments were needed to perfect the plans. Then came the problem of marketing. He had to create a want which the people had not

yet experienced — no easy task for a youngster. He demonstrated the beneficial use of ice in hospitals and its value in preserving foods. He taught the people how much more refreshing cold drinks were than those unchilled by selling both at the same price. He introduced ice creams into places where the people had never heard of them. The administration of these activities required a person of tremendous drive and one capable of undiminished enthusiasm. Such a person was Frederic Tudor.

Organizing his plan in 1806, he soon succeeded in introducing ice to most of the islands of the West Indies. The period of the Embargo and the War of 1812 proved disastrous, but after the war, renewed effort built up the business to a flourishing state. Again, the depression of 1819–1821 affected the trade, but in the face of such discouragement new houses were opened in New Orleans and other southern cities. By 1835 he was shipping ice to Calcutta. At one time he had ice houses in Havana, Jamaica, New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Galle, and Singapore.

His letters are excellent and show better than anything else the character of the man. Below are transcripts of three letters written at widely different periods in his life. The first illustrates his initial enthusiasm coupled with sagacious planning. The second indicates that he did not have clear sailing from the inception of the idea. Here, after seventeen years of ceaseless effort, he finds himself faced with bankruptcy. The third letter shows that he had not been overpowered, even by the greatest obstacles — that he had succeeded, and was still, at the age of sixty-nine, capable of the same farsighted planning.

Boston, Dec^r 10th 1805

My Dear Cousin

I embrace the opportunity of M^r Boit of communicating to you a scheme which I had hoped of opening to you personally, but by your late letters will not be here in season.

William & myself have formed a plan of carrying *Ice* to the west Indies & have associated with us your Brother James who with William sailed for Martinique on the 2^d of november. Their object is to obtain of the different colonial governments an exclusive privilege of carrying the article to the several Islands & calculate to obtain the desired privilege from most of the Windward Islands governments & finally Jamaica but it will be out of their power to visit Cuba.



Frederic Tuon

The idea of carrying ice to tropical climates will at first no doubt startle & astonish you but when you take into consideration the following circumstances I think you will cease to doubt the practicability of the thing & adopt the proposal I shall presently make to you.

"The captain of an American ship in London during peace time could obtain no freight or employ for his vessel some one said to him in jest what he took in earnest — "we have had a mild winter & there is no ice in the Icehouses suppose you go to Norway for a cargo." He did & arrived at London with a full cargo & realized a very handsome profit notwithstanding he was detained a long time in settling with the custom-house on account of duties.

"Ice has been frequently found to go on the ends of boards safely to the west indies without thawing during the voyage." This is a very remarkable fact because the ice so situated must have been very much exposed in the damp hold of a vessel loaded with green boards.

"Ice-creams were carried to Trinidad by the English when they were in possession of that Island in pots packed in sand from Europe."

"Ice is carried every year to S. Eustatius & preserved there."

Since W & J sailed I have the following fact from W. Codman lately arrived from Lima which lies in latitude about 12°. He says that ice is to be had there at all times at the retail price of about 2 rials or 25 cts p^r lb. This is brought from the mountains & monopolized by the King.

The above are the principal grounds by which we have been induced to engage in this enterprize & are the result of unremitted research for the last four months & may be relied on as correct.

William & James intend to solicit the governments in the following manner accommodating to circumstances: which should you enter into the scheme may be a guide in soliciting the Spanish government. They go out under very favorable recommendations & being the bearers of a despatch from the French consul I hope will succeed.

The plan is first to solicit the French government at Martinique for an exclusive privilege of carrying ice there for ten years.

If they refuse to grant any exclusive privilege of themselves they intend to ask if they will do so untill further orders from home.

If they will not allow us to import exclusively will they let us build ice-houses & no one else.

And finally if they refuse every direct exclusive profit, they intend to demand if the government will do anything to encourage the enterprize, otherwise it must fall to the ground.

Thus you have the whole of our plan — if we succeed we realize immense fortunes. If we fail, which is next to an impossibility, the loss is trifling. By calculation the ice will cost us there not much over a cent a pound!

The plan is so far executed that I have already purchased a fine Brig in which I shall sail with a load of ice soon after I hear from William &

James. The cost of the vessel & outfits including the ice will not stand me in more than 6 to 7 thousand doll^r.

The Island of Cuba is too important to overlook & is worth for this object at least half of the rest of the west Indies I therefore propose to you to solicit of the government of that Island the exclusive privilege of carrying ice to Havana & other parts of Cuba & either take with us one half concessⁿ if the said privilege is obtained or if disliking the plan be paid one thousand dollars for obtaining the privilege for us you notifying the same in letter in answer to this.

You will understand me to mean. We wish you to procure from the gov^t of Cuba a grant exclusive in which we offer you either to take a concessⁿ of half or procure the privilege for us & we engage to pay you one thousand dollars with reasonable charges, in obtaining it you however to determine which you will do & write to that effect as early as possible.

I will not comment further respecting this scheme of ours but I do not hesitate to declare that three times ten thousand dollars would not tempt me for a moment to give up my part in it & I will only add that after explaining the plan & shewing the manner I intended to pack the ice in the vessel to a gentleman who makes natural philosophy his study he gave his opinion decidedly in favor of the scheme.

You will of course in soliciting the Spanish government be as secret as possible for otherwise it is possible some enterprising Yankee may catch the idea & superceed your plans.

I conclude with reiterating to you that this scheme is not the offspring of a moment & tho. I may not have sufficiently explained the plan to your satisfaction as to its practicability yet I assure you it has received the sanction of men whose opinion can be relied on.

I am with best wishes
Your friend & ser^t
Frederic Tudor

Boston Feb^y 5th 1821

D^r Sir

On the 3^d inst. I received a letter from Mess^{rs} Marean & Furniss on the subject of the protest of your bills & from the contents I am induced to think they will refuse the payment of the freight money of the B^e Jane which I may expect to come along upon me to be paid here in the course of a short month. With this non payment will come loss & mortification great & keen. It will be the *final* stroke to our Ice business at S^t Thomas & S^t Pierre. To lift it up again is past my ability.

The last 12 months has changed the face of my affairs so greatly that from being as I thought a rich man I am almost a Bankrupt. The extensive depression of the sales of Ice has produced this state of things & I have not faith enough to look forward to better times. In Havana, my best market, the falling off has amounted to one half & in Charleston & Sava^t

one third & the undertaking in New Orleans is begun upon borrowed money & commences in sorrow & vexation, of which there needs no account.

The motives which urge me to exertion to revive these drooping concerns are of high character. They are as strong as can well be imagined to be given to a man, to scourge him to his highest effort. The aid & assistance which I have received from my brother Gardiner are very considerable but what is of greater importance is that I am indebted to your sisters, as your Brother Sam tells me \$3000 — their money it was which he lent me! Is it possible that I can be placed in a situation more cruel? Can a man be placed in a position where the obligation is more cogent? The distress & anxiety which I suffer is past the possibility of being expressed. I mention it to you in order that you may know the whole of the disasters which I have to sustain.

This situation of affairs being made known to you there arises the question, what is to be done?

For me to proceed any further is impossible. It is impossible for me to ship any more Ice. From this second non-payment of freight, as I have before said comes the expiring effort, in its payment here.

It seems that you can do no more. It is then done & finished. It would be well however to tell the government of Mart^{que} that in the course of 3 years we have lost \$25,000 — & that we are ruined & obliged to give the business up. To the government of S^t Thomas I would also write that that Island has now the last supply.

It is *possible* that these governments *may* do something; but it is a straw almost useless to catch at.

This sad retrospection & prospect is all the consolation we have & bitter enough it is. The abandonment of Marean & Furniss is neither unfair or unreasonable still I cannot but think they would consult their own interest in continuing some little aid in addition.

If I could realize here \$1200. — I think I could get out a large cargo to Mart^{que} but having exhausted my entire means & having involved myself in debts which I cannot discharge for a long time to come if ever; I am entirely without the power of proceeding.

It would be best in winding up these concerns to be as accurate as possible in shewing the exact account of all expenses & also of the receipts & next winter, if it should appear that a profit will arise, possibly some aid may be obtained here from friends.

So ends our efforts. I lament it as well on your acc^t as my own. It would have given me the most sincere pleasure to have participated with you in a profitable business; but circumstances having ordered it otherwise, we must endeavour to bear with as much calmness as possible unavoidable misfortunes.

I remain my dear C. yours
most truly,
Frederic Tudor

Step. Cabot Esq.

Nahant Aug^t 4th 1852

Mess^{rs} Weld & Minot

Gent^l

I have for above a year past been considering that it is time for me to make arrangements for infusing into my business of Ice some new strength; by engaging in it some younger men. It is becoming something of a wild beast, in its strength of growth, & requiring far more care & good management than I have either the will or the ability to give it.

I therefore wish to get assistance either to wind it up, which is difficult, or to continue it; under the direction of new heads: who may take advantage of my experience & lead it along (avoiding my mistakes) to new & far greater advantages, than I have ever realized. The unusual character of the business is that of "progress & advancement." It may be said of it — 1st "That wherever & whenever it has been introduced; in a place of sufficient population & prosperity; it has been *unsuccessful* at first. 2^d That this character has uniformly changed & profit has come & the demand increased, with time & habit. 3^d That it is every where still progressing & advancing; with each year; with new strength.

The present month it is forty seven years since I formed the plan & next Feb^y the same number of years since I went to sea with the first cargo, in a Brig, belonging to myself bound for S. Pierre, Martinique. I have thought I might yet work upon it, up to the half century: but as I am just upon the point of being sixty nine years of age, I prefer *now* to make the attempt, to infuse new youth, skill & energy, into a business: which I cannot but think, is of great promise, for the future: as well as of present good realization. That it is one whose risks are known, one wherein good practice & economy tell with great force: finally, one which cannot readily be gone into by others.

I have thought it might be of sufficient interest to your house to supply to the business what I inform you are its wants. — And gradually relieve me from much care & soon of all care; in the conduct of the business.

What I desire is to realize its present worth; but as neither you or any other responsible person would be willing to place me in such a position; as I should expect; I must continue my interest; giving to others the opportunity of an advance to profits derived from their own exertions: which should be more; or less: according to the risks they would be disposed to run. If it is for *mere* commissions, that they would come in; I should say I do not by such an arrangement secure what I want: because as I advance to old age: or die: I am without relief: or my heirs will be: when at a future time, I am less able to take anew the burden on my shoulders & heirs will make a poor hand in carrying on such a business. Some closer interest is therefore needed. It seems to me not necessary I should at this time enlarge upon this subject — I have made out an outline

& shall see how the matter strikes you: If agreeably further explanations will be made & with a view to this I am looking into the earlier period of the business in order to show from what it has advanced.

I am very truly yr. ob. s.

Frederic Tudor

Sources for Maritime History

It is remarkable to see how the items of manuscript material in a particular field, coming in over a period of years and from numerous sources, do, in the final analysis, dovetail together to form one unified collection. The result is like a piece of mosaic. This is the thing which fascinates the collector. Each item alone may seem more or less insignificant, but the whole is more complete because of the least significant part.

Among the many industries for which Baker Library has been collecting source material, the most romantic and colorful is undoubtedly the shipping industry. Recent acquisitions along this line have so added to the value of this group that it has become an outstanding collection in its field.

The earliest shipping records of any considerable extent came to the Society from Charles H. Taylor. They are the papers of Israel Thorndike and cover the years 1778–1818. Israel Thorndike was a shipping merchant of Beverly, trading primarily with the West Indies, though he also sent cargoes to England and Mediterranean ports as well as to the East Indies and Calcutta. The papers include letters, accounts of cargoes sold and invoices of goods purchased at various ports, accounts current with captains of vessels, insurance papers, etc. From these records it is possible to learn much about the character of American shipping in the days of its very beginning. We can see the extent to which the merchant was forced to rely on the sagacity of his supercargo, and we see something of the difficulties that confronted him in establishing contacts in foreign countries. Further, the papers in the collection relative to the French Spoliation claims indicate the problems American merchants had to face which were arising out of the Napoleonic Wars.

Another interesting group of shipping papers came to the Baker Library only recently. These are the records of Augustine Heard of Ipswich, Massachusetts. They run back to 1807, covering first