

Newton, Gordon, Johnston, Murdoch, and Scott of Madeira, Portugal letters

Ms. Coll. 1417

Finding aid prepared by Cory Austin Knudson.

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University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts

2019 September 27

Table of Contents

Summary Information.....	3
Biography/History.....	4
Scope and Contents.....	4
Administrative Information.....	5
Related Materials	6
Controlled Access Headings.....	6
Collection Inventory.....	8

Summary Information

Repository	University of Pennsylvania: Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts
Creator	Newton, Gordon, and Johnston.
Creator	Newton, Gordon, and Murdoch.
Creator	Newton, Gordon, Murdoch, and Co.
Creator	Newton, Gordon, Murdoch, and Scott.
Title	Newton, Gordon, Johnston, Murdoch, and Scott of Madeira, Portugal letters
Call number	Ms. Coll. 1417
Date [inclusive]	1790-1835
Extent	0.2 linear foot (1 box)
Language	English
Abstract	<p>This collection comprises thirty-nine letters from American businessmen to the Madeira, Portugal-based wine merchants Francis Newton, Alexander Johnston, Thomas Gordon, and their partners, spanning the period from 1790 to 1835. Most of these letters discuss trade relations, the terms of specific deals, and the fluctuations of the market. The most common item of discussion is the exchange of flour or, to a lesser extent, corn and other grains for Madeira wine. Most of the letters (twenty-four) are sent from Philadelphia, while merchants from Boston, Charleston, New York, Norfolk, and Petersburg also appear in the correspondence.</p>

Cite as:

Newton, Gordon, Johnston, Murdoch, and Scott of Madeira, Portugal letters, 1790-1835, Ms. Coll. 1417, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania

Biography/History

The wine trading firm at the center of this collection was first formed by Francis Newton and Alexander Johnston in the late 1740s. Newton and Johnston had fled their native Scotland where they had fought for Charles Edward Stuart, known as “the Young Pretender” to detractors and “Bonnie Prince Charlie” to supporters, in the failed Jacobite rising of 1745. Initially working as a bookkeeper in Johnston’s London counting house, Newton would move to Madeira, Portugal in 1748 to establish the Madeira wine trading firm that would come to constitute the core of their growing business operations. Newton would be joined by his brother Thomas and Johnston’s nephew Thomas Gordon in 1758. The consortium Newton, Gordon, and Johnston, and its various successors, would become a dominant player in the international Madeira wine trade. The company persists to this day under the name of Cossart Gordon, which claims to be the oldest shipper of Madeira wine.

According to David Hancock’s *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (2009), “Newton & Gordon (and its successors) focused on England and the West Indies: 171 of its 210 customers during the early 1770s lived in one of these two places, as did 246 of its 273 customers a decade later, and 303 of its 404 customers at the end of the century” (p. 151). The firm’s business interests, Hancock demonstrates, are reflected in its expressed political commitments—while initially staunchly pro-British at the beginning of the American Revolution; by 1790 U.S. buyers of Madeira wine had saturated the market and Newton et. al. began to condemn both the military and economic assaults of the British on their former colonies. The newly formed United States would become, over the eighteenth century, the largest market for Madeira in the world. This collection bears witness to this evolution, containing business letters received by the firm from American merchants over the period 1790 1835. While covering a proportionately limited period of the firm’s existence and a relatively smaller portion of their overall market, the collection offers insight into the development and growth of the firm’s trading network as well as the minutiae of its day-to-day operations.

Scope and Contents

This collection comprises thirty-nine letters from American businessmen to the Madeira, Portugal-based wine merchants Francis Newton, Alexander Johnston, Thomas Gordon, and their partners, spanning the period from 1790 to 1835. Most of these letters discuss the establishment and maintenance of trade

relations, the terms of specific deals, and the fluctuations of the market more generally. The most common item of discussion throughout the collection is the exchange of flour or, to a lesser extent, corn and other grains for Madeira wine. While some mention is made of the West Indies and elsewhere, all of the letters primarily focus on trade between Madeira and the major cities of the east coast of the United States. Philadelphia is by far the most well represented location, with twenty-four letters from fifteen different businessmen and firms; while merchants from Boston, Charleston, New York, Norfolk, and Petersburg also appear in the correspondence.

The Madeira firm initially built by Scottish émigrés Francis Newton and Alexander Johnston went through many changes in name through its history, and at certain periods it is unclear precisely who the primary partners of the firm were. This collection is organized according to the names to which the bulk of the letters of a given period are addressed: Series I. Letters to Newton, Gordon, and Johnston; Series II. Letters to Newton, Gordon, and Murdoch; Series III. Letters to Newton, Gordon, Murdoch, and Scott; Series IV. Letters to Newton, Gordon, Murdoch, and Co. While there is little change in the subject matter discussed in the letters in each series, this chronological order will allow researchers to follow the growth of the business specifically, as well as the development of transatlantic trade and the movements of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century market more generally. With regard to the latter, many letters include tables of prices for staples such as flour, rice, pork, tallow, butter, corn, and beef, providing an opportunity to trace the specific fluctuations in commodity values that shaped the contours of early U.S. capitalism and eighteenth-century transatlantic trade.

While centering on the trade of Madeira wine and thus offering some insight into one of the period's most popular drinks, this collection is of much more interest to researchers interested in business than those interested in wine and wine-making, which is rarely discussed in any detail.

Administrative Information

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Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use.

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Source of Acquisition

Sold by Michael Brown Rare Books, 2018.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

At University of Michigan: Newton & Gordon collection 1762-1819.

Controlled Access Headings

FORM/GENRE(S)

- Correspondence

GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- Portugal--Commerce--United States

PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Gordon, Thomas
- Johnston, Alexander
- Murdoch, Thomas
- Newton, Francis

SUBJECT(S)

- Business
- International trade
- Madeira wine

- Shipping
- Wine and wine making
- Wine and wine making--Portugal
- Wine industry

Collection Inventory

	Box	Folder
Letters to Newton, Gordon, and Johnston, 1790-1791.	1	1
Letters to Newton, Gordon, and Murdoch, 1792-1804.	1	2
Letters to Newton, Gordon, Murdoch, and Scott, 1816-1832.	1	3
Letters to Newton, Gordon, Murdoch, and Co., 1835.	1	4