

Adventure On The High Seas

by Lynne Belluscio

Over the weekend, I started reading the “Journal of a Trading Voyage Around the World, 1805 – 1808” written by Isaac Iselin. At first glance it doesn’t sound too compelling, but I hope it will give me a better understanding of how the LeRoy family made all its money.

The man who wrote the journal was the “supercargo” (I had to research that term. It’s a derivative of a Spanish word “sobrecargo.” The supercargo was the man in charge of the cargo and represented the merchants who owned it. On a merchant vessel, he was considered the second most important man on board, after the captain.) Isaac Iselin was from Sweden. He came to New York City and joined the brokerage house of Herman LeRoy, William Bayard, and James McEvers.

In 1800, he signed aboard the *Enterprise*, which was the first merchant ship out of New York in the China trade and one of the first ships in the illegal trade against the Spaniards on the California Coast. Prior to the voyage of *Enterprise*, the merchant houses were based in Boston, Salem and Newport.

Iselin returned from China in 1802 with a very valuable cargo, and an enormous amount of experience. For two years he worked in the offices at LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers. Then he became the supercargo for the brig, *Maryland*, which set sail October 1805 out of New York. The *Maryland* sailed to South America, around Cape Horn, and sailed up the West Coast of South America, stopping in Peru and then to California, and then to Hawaii, Guam, and other Pacific Islands before heading to China and then back east around the Cape of Good Hope and back to New York City. The accounts are full of adventure - of strange people - -strange food - - - political intrigue.

The Journal wasn’t published

until 1897 and only a few copies were made. In fact, only three copies can be located. The copy that I have was reprinted in 1999 with an explanation. It seems that the Journal contained the descriptions of trade routes and hunting sites for sea otters and seals which was highly protected information. It is believed that the journal was kept by LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers so that the company secrets would not be revealed. When Isaac Iselin returned to New York after the successful voyage of the *Maryland*, he started his own independent mercantile firm and in 1815 he joined a prominent textile firm. He was quite successful and eventually returned to Sweden, leaving his son in charge of the company.

At the time of the voyage, Americans were venturing to the far reaches of the world to open trade routes. With the end of the American Revolution, merchant ships from Boston were competing with English traders of the East Indian Trade. The Chinese wanted sea otter skins, ginseng, and silver. The English supplied them with opium from India. Some American merchants were acquiring opium from Turkey for the China trade, although there is no mention in Iselin’s journal to indicate that the *Maryland* was

involved with the drug trade.

Iselin, kept interesting notes. The ship had to carry provisions and water for nearly 60 men, as well as animals. Food was often scarce, and they ate sea turtle, seal, shark, and unknown fish. Isaac notes that he refused to eat salt meat of any kind. He wrote that the cook, one day served the ship’s cat in a fricassee. Several of the sailors showed signs of scurvy and they made efforts to find oranges and lemons. Finding potable water always seemed to be a concern and was often dangerous and difficult.

As far as I can determine, the *Maryland* was a two masted “brig.” The captain was Jonathan Perry, Jr. Unfortunately, he died in December 1807 after leaving China and was buried at sea. The third mate took over as captain. His inexperience might explain the necessity of the *Maryland* joining another ship, the *Clarkson*, after rounding the southern tip of Africa. Nearing Bermuda they were challenged by a British man-of-war, the *Horatio*, and after a canon shot as a signal to heave to, the *Maryland* was boarded. Isaac wrote: “We should have been anxious to avoid the visit of the cruiser, under all circum-

stances, but were particularly so, from the uncertainty we were in, after the reports we had received several times during our voyage, of the state of the political relations between the United States and England.” This of course was one of the reasons why the War of 1812 erupted. The British continued to board American ships and any seaman suspected of being British was taken and pressed into the service of the British Navy.

Apparently there were no issues with the *Maryland*’s crew and the *Horatio* continued on its way, looking for more American ships. Just an additional note - - after the treaty was signed with Britain at the end of the war, it was an American ship, owned by LeRoy, Bayard and McEvers, that set sail for India, to be the first to establish trade connections. On board was young Jacob LeRoy, who I believe was serving as the supercargo.

I’m still reading through the journal and wish I had paid more attention to my World History teacher to understand what was going on between 1805 and 1808, but thankfully the Internet connection is good. It just takes a lot of time to Google all the names and dates to know what’s going on.

