Robert Bennet Forbes Biography

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Biography

Robert Bennet Forbes (1804-1889), merchant and shipowner, was among the most prominent Americans engaged in the China trade in the 19th century.

Robert Forbes was born on Sept. 18, 1804, near Boston. His father, a merchant, was prosperous enough to educate him briefly in France and at the Milton Academy. When his father's business failed, young Forbes entered the employ of his uncles, James and Thomas H. Perkins, who were among the most successful New England merchants of the early 19th century.

In 1817 Forbes sailed in one of the Perkins' ships to China, for the first time seeing the country that would soon supply him with great personal wealth. He became a sea captain and trader with his uncles' firm. His chance for fortune came in 1830, when Perkins and Company joined another leading firm in the China trade, Russell and Company. Forbes settled in Canton, exporting Chinese silks, earthenware, and teas to America and importing sandalwood, textiles, furs, and opium. After a few lucrative years he returned to Boston as the agent for Russell and Company.

Hit hard by the economic panic of 1837, Forbes returned to China to regain his fortune. Remaining in Canton during the Opium War, he did a booming business until the British closed the harbor. He returned to Boston early in the 1840s and went back to China for several years at the end of that decade.

During the 1840s Forbes secured or constructed many trading vessels. He contributed a few minor inventions to the science of shipbuilding and made early use of metal hulls and screw propellers. During his last years he wrote pamphlets concerning his career in China, commerce, and improvements in shipbuilding and maritime safety, as well as his autobiography. He died in Boston in 1889.

Forbes and other merchants in the China trade enacted a colorful if somewhat inglorious chapter in American history. In the early decades of the American Republic they opened up commercial avenues that contributed to the young nation's economic growth. In their commerce with China, however, they exploited the narcotics trade and were identified with other Western elements exploiting China. They may thus be said to have taken short-run profits at the cost of long-range political and moral considerations.