

# Letters from the South Seas, 1802-1823

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## Introduction

Several of the crew of the brig *Union* and the schooner *Independence* wrote letters to relatives and friends in North America. Six of these are preserved in the archive of the Townsend Society in Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York. They have been transcribed and edited here to shed some light on the events of the voyages, and the relationships between members of the crew and their associates. They are historically significant letters in the archive, placing the Townsends squarely within the dramatic story of early American maritime exploration, sealing and trading in the South Pacific.

The principal people who were authors or are mentioned in the letters are:

Isaiah Townsend (1784 – ?1806) was the son of Israel Townsend (1742-1832) and Phebe Weeks (1752-1836) who lived in Armonk, North Castle, New York State. They had moved from Oyster Bay on Long Island in 1776 to avoid the attacks by British warships at the start of the American War of Independence. They had ten children, including Isaiah's younger brother Samuel. Isaiah shipped as Mate on the *Union* and was later appointed Captain of the *Independence*. Isaiah's brother Israel (1791-1855) stayed in Armonk and became a prominent citizen with tasks including Postmaster, Justice of the Peace and Road Commissioner. His wife was Phebe Thorn Townsend (1793-1864).

Stephen Thorn (1779-1857) was born in Oyster Bay, New York. Stephen was the ship's carpenter on the *Union* who built the *Independence* at American River, under the direction of Daniel Wright, First Officer. He sailed with Isaiah Townsend on the *Independence* but transferred to the *Union* at Port Pegasus, New Zealand. According to Paddock's letter he was working for Simeon Lord at Port Jackson in July 1806, after the sealers returned from the Antipodes Islands. From the letters, Stephen was a good friend of Isaiah Townsend. He was living with Isaiah's brother Israel and his family at Armonk, NY at the 1850 US census.

Simeon Lord (1771-1840) was transported to New South Wales in 1790 on the *Atlantic* for stealing several hundred yards of calico and muslin in his native Yorkshire. He was an entrepreneurial genius and quite a slippery customer by repute. By 1798 he had his own warehouse, and by 1799 owned his first ship. Lord "traded up" from rum to iron and timber, and then embarked on manufacture. In workshops staffed by assigned convicts, he made the consumer goods that were still in short supply, and thus costly, in Sydney: candles, soap, glasses, stockings, cloth, harness, boots and leather hats. Between 1806 and 1809 Lord and his partners Kable and Underwood sold over 127,000 sealskins in London, many more in China and Calcutta. Sealing led naturally to the Pacific trade in sandalwood and other commodities. Lord also received extensive land grants in the Bathurst district of NSW and ran sheep and cattle there.

Isaac Pendleton, brig *Union*. Capt. Pendleton (1777-1804) from Stonington, Connecticut was hired by Edmund Fanning & Co. of New York to take the brig *Union* to the South Seas in 1802 for whaling and sealing. Pendleton met with Capt. Nicholas Baudin at King George Sound [later Albany, WA] and was directed to Kangaroo Island as a suitable base for sealing. Overwintering at American River, the crew built the schooner *Independence*. When the *Union* returned to Sydney in June 1804, Pendleton had 12,000 to 14,000 seal skins procured at Kangaroo Island. These were left in the store of Simeon Lord while the *Union* went for sandalwood to Tongatapu, where Capt. Pendleton was ambushed and killed by the natives.

Jonathan Paddock, ship *Favorite*. Capt. Paddock was born in 1770 at Nantucket, Massachusetts and died at sea in 1808. His wife Rachel Bunker (1770-1827) was also from a well-established shipping and whaling family there. The *Independence*, under the command of Isaiah Townsend, reached Sydney from Norfolk Island on 23rd April, 1805. Two days afterwards the *Favorite*, 245 tons, commanded by Capt. Paddock, arrived from the Crozets, and on 11th June sailed in company with the *Independence* from Sydney for the Antipodes Islands via Port Pegasus, Stewart Island, New Zealand.

Notes by the editor are in square brackets [thus].

## The Letters

**12 December 1802.** From Isaiah Townsend, to his brother Samuel Townsend; tells of his plans to sail, as Second Mate on the *Union*, to the South Seas and Canton in China. [Townsend Archive TSA 81.1.6.1]

Dear Brother,  
North Castle, September 12, 1802 [Sunday]

I have to inform you that I am going to the South Seas and from there to Canton [Guangzhou in China]. I expect to sail in about ten days from New York. I hope you will not think of going as I can't see it will answer at any rate for you as the share for the [illegible] hands is but trifling.

I am going Mate and get a much better pay. There is two vessels fitting out, which are to keep company one is sailing from New York and the other at Stonington and are to meet at New Haven or New London there to get our compliment of men; there is vacant berths for any smart young fellow that wishes to go.

I would thank you to write to me before I sail if can't make it convenient to come down to New York. I shall go to New York the last of the week; Don't let this letter be read by any one as we want men; and [erased]

I am your sincere friend and brother, Isaiah Townsend

**7 March 1804.** From Isaiah Townsend, at Port Jackson, New South Wales, to his brother Samuel; mentions his experiences, Capt. Pendleton, Daniel Wright, schooner *Independence*. [Townsend Archive TSA 81.1.6.2]

Port Jackson New South Wales

Dear brother,  
March the 7 1804 [Wednesday]

I write in hope to inform you that I am well and hope these leaves may come to your hands when you are in the same state. I suppose you would be fond of knowing a little how the game has went with me since my departure from New York but it would take a half quire of paper at least to give you the particulars thereof.

We have been cruising on the SW coast of New Holland but to little advantage. We have built a fine schooner of about 30 tons. We call her the *Independence* which Mr. Daniel Wright, Mr. carpenter [Stephen Thorn] and so more of our crew is now cruising in Bass's Straits. Those straits separate Van Diemens Land from New South Wales. Capt. Pendleton, myself and the remainder of the crew is in here with the ship for supplies.

A few days ago the prisoners that were in the country settlements being kept in hard slavery arose in large mobs and when they first set out the cry with them was Death or Liberty. They rose first in Paramatta and were to be joined by almost every other settlement. These people go by the name of Croppies [Irish convicts]. The men came to the Governor in the night he immediately mustered all his forces...to suppress which I believe they have nearly completed. There are hangings of them almost every day. Those Croppies is chiefly people that was sent from Ireland for sedition. They [illegible]

From your roving brother  
Isaiah Townsend.

PS

I was very happy to receive a letter from you on the 30 of December 1803 and to hear our father's family was well. I wish you to remember me and give my best respects to my father, mother, brothers and sisters.

Look for me when you see me

**26 April 1805.** From Isaiah Townsend, at Port Jackson, to his father at North Castle, NY; mentions schooner *Independence*, Capt. Pendleton, his success at sealing. [Townsend Archive TSA 81.1.6.3]

April the 26 1805 [Friday]

Sydney, Port Jackson New South Wales

Dear Father

As I have at present an opportunity of informing you of my present business and prospect of making a great voyage though a long one – I write this with pleasure; in hope it may come to your hands whilst you are all enjoying your healths, as I am at present.

I arrived to this port on the 21 of this month in my little schooner *Independence* after an eight month cruise looking ten days for seal in which I have been very successful and have now the schooner *Governor King* under my direction, which is to sail this evening or in the morning in the same expedition commanded by Capt. Edwards and further I have power to send as many vessels as I think advantageous for the concern of which I have seven percent of all property... in this expedition as I am Commander in Chief in the business. I am at present engaged for fifteen months and as much longer as I think advantageous for me. I suppose you have heard of the misfortune of Capt. Pendleton at Tongatapoo [Tongatapu, Tonga] where he was massacred by the natives:

We have at present two ships from Nantucket in search of seal skins.

It would be a great satisfaction to me to receive a letter from you which you may direct to be left at Mr. Simeon Lord at this port. It is my greatest desire these lines may find you all in good health. I have but little hopes of getting to America short of two years: But when I do return I intend to stay at home and rove the world no more.

You will please to remember me to my dear mother and brothers and sisters and tell them that I have not forgot them.

So no more but I remain your affectionate son Isaiah Townsend



*Panoramic view of Port Jackson, ca. 1821. Drawn by Major James Taylor, 48th Regiment, engraved by R. Havell & Sons. Source: State Library of New South Wales*

**25 May 1805.** From Isaiah Townsend, at New South Wales, to his brother [not named]; mentions his success in sealing, schooner *Independence*; Capt. Paddock, ship *Favorite*, of Nantucket; Capt. Fanning, Stephen Thorn, Capt. Pendleton. [Townsend Archive TSA 81.1.6.4]

May the 25, 1805 [Saturday]  
Sydney Port Jackson New South Wales

Dear brother,

I take this opportunity to inform you that I am in good health and hope these lines find you the same; I have likewise to inform you that I have been very successful since I left the Union. On a sealing expedition I have at present several vessels and a large number of men under my direction in this business. Besides my little schooner the *Independence* which I command and have now mated with Capt. Paddock in the ship *Favorite* of Nantucket; each of us to carry 22 men in number and expect to put to sea in a few days on a sealing voyage, and I have for my share seven percent of all property obtained by all the vessels and men employed in this expedition. I intend to return home as soon as I can without injuring myself too much, which I hope will be in the course of fifteen or eighteen months.

I was much disappointed in not receiving a letter from you by Capt. Fanning. But have consider it miscarried; I likewise wish you to inform our parents brothers and sisters that I am well and very desirous to hear from them.

You may inform Stephen Thorn's mother that he is well and is with me.

I suppose you have heard of Capt. Pendleton's misfortune how he was taken by the natives and is beyond doubt massacred at the Isle of Tongadaboo [Tongatapu, Tonga], After this Mr. Wright returned to this port with the Union and soon after his arrival here went out to order to proceed on the voyage as before; Since we hear he was castaway and all hands lost at the Fegee Isl [Koro Island, Fiji]. Still I have hope he is....safe. If he has arrived to America safe, please to inform that I am much obliged to him for his letters he left for me; Please inform Mr. Thorn, carpenter that I am well and wish he was with me.

So no more as I am in haste... only that I remain your affectionate brother, Isaiah Townsend

I should be very happy to hear from you if possible. You may direct a letter to Mr. Simeon Lord of this place and most probable that I shall receive it. Please to give my respects to all inquiring friends.

**25 October. 1807.** From Capt. Paddock, at Nantucket, to Israel Townsend, Sr., at New York City, about the apparent loss at sea of his son Isaiah Townsend; mentions Simeon Lord, Stephen Thorn. [Townsend Archive TSA 81.1.6.5]

Nantucket Oct 25th 1807 [Sunday]

Dear Sir,

I received yours of the 7th October. I am very sorry to have to inform you of what account I can give you of your son Capt. Townsend as it must be so disagreeable to you. I have every reason to believe he is no more in this life. We lived together in one house at Port Jackson in New Holland. We sailed together from that in June the 15th 1805 for the coast of New Zealand [Port Pegasus on Stewart Island].

Thereafter we sailed I took 8 men from the schooner & parted from him expecting to meet him again at a Certain Island Appointed for Meeting [the Antipodes Islands]. I arrived at the place of our destination where I obtained my skins. But I never saw nor heard of him after. I had hoped he had turn back but nine months after I returned to Port Jackson & found no account of him. We had accounts from all parts of New Holland and New Zealand, and all other ports and places in that sea where he might have got in case of an accident. But no account of him after parting from me. He had not more than six or seven weeks provision on board of the schooner so that chances of his going from that sea very little. I think from every circumstance we have to reason but to think he was lost. We had the weather very hard after we parted from him.

As to his property, I cannot give you a very particular account only I understood all that he had obtained in that country was in the hands of Simeon Lord, a merchant in Port Jackson whom he was employed by. I never heard Mr. Lord say what was due Capt. Townsend, only the men under his direction had obtained about eighteen thousand skins before he

supposed him lost. What share of them was due Capt. Townsend I cannot tell. Stephen Thorn you mentioned, I took him off the schooner and left him well in Port Jackson at work at ship's carpenter business for Mr. Lord his old employer. I left him in July the 20th 1806. I cannot think of anything more to relate concerning Capt. Townsend, so remain your most

Obd. Humble Serv  
Jonathan Paddock



*Un-named sealing schooner off the coast of Stewart Island, New Zealand. Source: State Library of Tasmania.*

**9 February 1823.** From Townsend [probably Samuel], at New York City, to Simeon Lord, at New South Wales, about the loss of Isaiah Townsend at sea. [Townsend Archive TSA 81.1.6.6]

Simeon Lord Esq.

New York 9 Feb 1823 [Sunday]

Sir

In the year 1802 or about that date my brother Isaiah Townsend left this port as second mate of the Union (then a brig but afterwards altered into a ship), Capt. Pendleton, Dan'l Wright chief mate. In the vessel was a young man as common sailor, who is the only person of this expedition that ever returned, his name was Stephen Thorn.

On the coast of New Holland they built a small vessel, a schooner which they called the Independence and of which my brother was commander & owner in whole or in part and into which he which he went with Stephen Thorn above mentioned & others to cruise for seal. In this cruise they discovered some islands, not before known, to which my brother gave the name of the Antipodes, supposing them directly opposite to his native land. Finding here an immense quantity of seal they returned to Port Jackson for a reinforcement of men and vessels. In the meantime the Captain of the Union and some of the hands had been murdered at one of the Fegee Islands & an attempt made to decoy the remainder ashore to share their fate. But an Irish woman [Elizabeth Morey], a prisoner whom the natives employed as interpreter, betrayed the scheme & save herself from the natives by diving and coming up on the other side of the vessel & a rope was thrown to her and she was taken on board. The canoes that had brought her were fired on and driven off by Mr. Wright, now Commander of the Union (who) returned to Port Jackson to get assistance & revenge the Captain's death. At that place he married this woman & having returned & battered down the town where Capt. Pendleton was killed, sailed down the coast and come to anchor. A violent gale coming on the vessel was lost and all hands perished except two Indians who saved themselves by sailing a great distance.

My brother on his return to Port Jackson as above related, & hearing of the loss of the Union entered into a partnership with Capt. Paddock of the ship Favorite of Nantucket to take seal on these islands with an agreement that 7% of all

proceeds of the voyage should go to my brother. They sailed from Port Jackson with the schooner Independence & ship Favorite & finding that the ship made more way than the schooner & would probably arrive first transferred to her all the hands they could spare from the schooner and the above-mentioned Stephen Thorn among the rest [probably at Port Pegasus]. The ship proceeded on her voyage, took her seal (and) returned to Port Jackson thence to Canton [present day Guangzhou, China]. The schooner was never afterwards heard of.



*Whaling brigs and ships at the Hobart wharf, 1885. The two masted brigs are the Maid of Erin and Victoria. Source: State Library of Tasmania.*

## The Townsend House, Armonk, New York

Israel Townsend and his wife Phebe Weeks moved to North Castle around 1776 from their Oyster Bay, Long Island home, to escape problems prevalent there during the American Revolution. They built a house at what is now 495 Main Street, Armonk, North Castle. The oldest part of the house faces the street, and the structure was unusually large for the period. It had some 16 rooms, a large kitchen, two very large open fireplaces and a Dutch oven. Israel and Phoebe Townsend had ten children. They located their family cemetery high up on the hill behind their house and it was here that they were buried in 1832 and 1836. Their son, Israel, born in 1791 and his wife Phebe are also buried there, as are later family members. The house has had a variety of owners and tenants over the years and at one time was a restaurant.

The 1850 Federal Census for North Castle lists the Israel Townsend household along with two others: A white household listed next to that of Andrew J Kinch Merchant and five listings from the household of Samuel Townsend: Israel Townsend, age 59; Phebe Townsend, age 56; Job L. Townsend, age 31; Israel Townsend, age 25; Stephen Thorn, age 71; Phebe Baker, age 56; Michael Casy, age 22; John Norton, age 21; A. Birdsall, age 27; and Margaret Smith, age 60.



*The Townsend House at 495 Main St., Armonk, North Castle, NY. Source: Google Maps*

The Stephen Thorn recorded in the census was the carpenter on the *Union* and friend of Isaiah Townsend. The North Castle Historical Society maintains a museum in the old Smith's Tavern in Armonk. Amongst the exhibits are a number of ship's carpentry tools forming the Thorn collection.



*Draw knife or froe*



*Three hand planes*



*Shipwright's protractor*

Elizabeth Sands Kinch (born Townsend) 1816-1891 was the daughter of Israel (b. 1791) and Phebe (b. 1793) Townsend. In her later years she told of a bachelor uncle, a sailor, who had owned a ship and made three trips around the world. On each trip he was gone for about three years before suddenly reappearing at the family homestead. The only likely candidates are Job (b. 1796) and Isaiah (b. 1784) both of whom were unmarried. The remaining brothers of Israel were all married with children.



*Location of places in text, northeastern United States of America*