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**“By your exertions conjointly with ours”:
British printed cottons in Brazil, 1827-1841**

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We have received your esteemed favor of the 8 March handing [over] Invoice of 14 Packages beautiful prints [per the ship] Martha, which we have sold at prices as noted at foot... [T]he styles as you remark are beautiful, and have met the Eye of our Bahia Purchasers equal to our expectations, we are now glad to observe that you have caught the idea [of the] Style & Colors of Prints suitable for this market & we hope by your exertions conjointly with ours we shall continue to improve.¹

An unnamed merchant employed by the British firm of Townley and Jackson wrote this statement from the Brazilian province of Bahia in May of 1828. His optimistic letter, sent to an unidentified merchant in England, implies that aesthetic qualities were key to success in the printed cotton trade. While the nature of the cloth was certainly significant, the people and policies surrounding its production, transportation, and sale were also critical. This paper will explore how, in the context of the Brazilian market for British printed cottons during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, merchants negotiated trans-Atlantic and local politics in pursuit of economic gain.

The primary lens through which this topic will be examined is the Potiers Diary, owned by the Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Delaware. (Figure 1.) The Diary contains excerpts of correspondence written by members of five English merchant firms operating in the Brazilian provinces of Bahia, Pernambuco, and Rio de Janeiro between 1827 and 1841. The text records many aspects of the textile trade to Brazil, including exchange rates, tariffs and other expenses, market conditions, and feedback from purchasers. Hundreds of small pieces of cloth—samples of the printed cottons mentioned in the letters—are glued into the book, providing clues to the merchants’ sometimes opaque commentary. The text and textiles introduce the variety and scope of political aspects of the textile trade in the emerging independent nation of Brazil.²

¹ Potiers Diary, letter of 21 May 1828, page 9, 08x122, Collection 50, Downs Collection, Winterthur Library. The author transcribed the entirety of the Potiers Diary; the transcript is available through the Winterthur Library. Left-handed pages in the Diary are paginated. In the transcript, right-handed pages are identified with the left-handed page number and a “.5” designation. This numbering system is used in references to the Diary.

² Sarah Ballou Parks, “Britain, Brazil, and the Trade in Printed Cottons, 1827-1841” (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 2010). The Diary records the correspondence of Townley & Jackson, Bahia, 1827-1829; James Cockshott & Co., Pernambuco, 1828-29; Stewart Brothers, Pernambuco 1830 and Bahia 1830-31, 1835, and 1838; Harrison Latham & Co., Bahia, 1839; and Bradshaw Wanklyn & Sons, Rio de Janeiro, 1828-41.



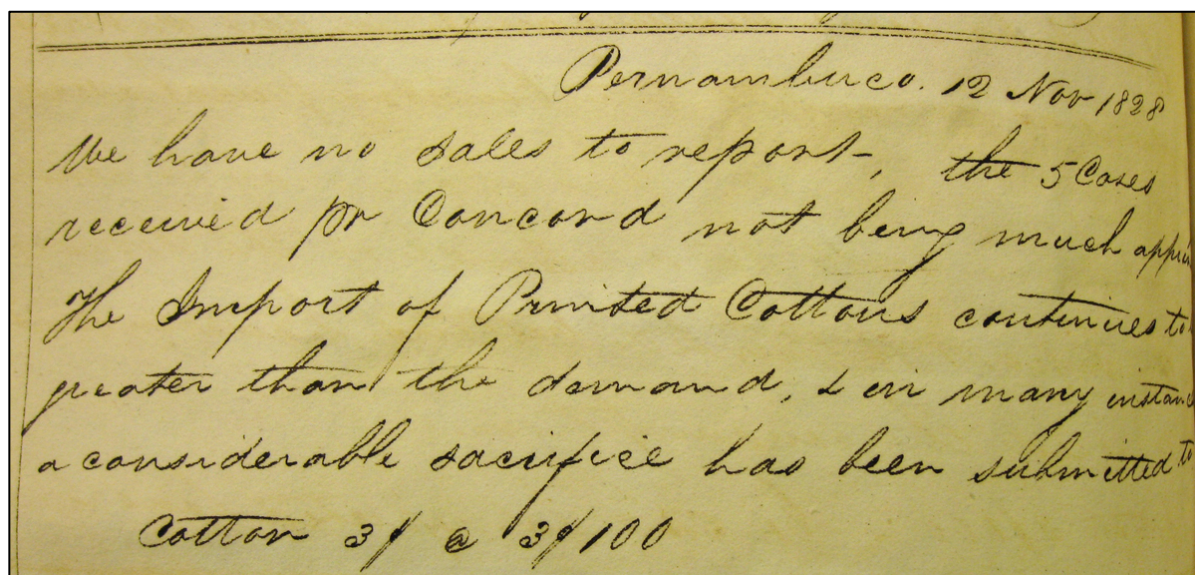
Figure 1. The 235-page Potiers Diary was compiled in Britain and includes letters and samples of English printed cottons sent by merchants working in Brazil. Col. 50, acc. 08x122, pages 95-95.5 (1830). Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

The nineteenth century was a pivotal period in Brazilian political history—a history largely shaped by economic relationships. Portugal colonized Brazil in 1500 to provide its trading ships a resupply point en route to Asia. Soon, the raw materials and agricultural products of Brazil, such as sugar, gold, diamonds, and coffee, became important commodities in their own right. The enormous workforce—much of it enslaved—that extracted and farmed these products was a receptive market for European goods. Brazil's international identity, even from its earliest colonial period, was based on global commerce.

Economic importance led to political power: Portugal used access to its South American colony as a bargaining chip. Beginning in 1642, England and Portugal negotiated a series of treaties that gave England the ability to trade directly with Brazil in return for its recognition of Portugal's independence. Although British access to Brazilian markets shifted according to political conditions, Portugal continued to give preferential treatment to English commerce for the next two hundred years.³

³ Alan K. Manchester, *British Preëminence in Brazil: Its Rise and Decline* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 2-4, 16.

In 1807, the Portuguese court, threatened by Napoleon despite England's support, decamped to Brazil and established Rio de Janeiro as the new seat of the Portuguese empire. This relocation stimulated the growth of Rio and its merchant trade: Between 1808 and 1822, the population of the city doubled. British traveler Robert Walsh found Rio de Janeiro awash with English products in 1828, with shops "filled with all kinds of European merchandize [sic], particularly Manchester shawls, handkerchiefs, cotton and calicos of the most showy colours, broad-cloths, silks, hats, boots, shoes, and stockings... The market was so overstocked that they were selling in the Rua dos Pescadores for less money than in Cheapside."⁴ The influx of imports to all Brazilian provinces drove down prices. A representative of James Cockshott and Company wrote from Pernambuco in 1828 that "the Import of Printed Cottons continues to be greater than the demand, & in many instances a considerable sacrifice has been submitted to."⁵ (Figure 2.)



Pernambuco. 12 Nov 1828

We have no sales to report, the 5 cases received for Concord not being much applied.

The Import of Printed Cottons continues to be greater than the demand, & in many instances a considerable sacrifice has been submitted to.

Cotton 3/ @ 3/100

Figure 2. The high volume of importation drove down the prices of printed cottons. Potiers Diary, Col. 50, acc. 08x122, page 32 (1828). Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

In Bahia, the textile market expanded as more traders came to the province. A merchant there urged patience, writing that "The Print trade of Bahia [we will] find [to] be a miserable one for the coming 6 mos/- so many new Houses have entered the trade this Season, but by and bye, as is usually the case, they will become disgusted & those who persever [sic] will have a good trade again."⁶

In 1820, the Portuguese court returned to Europe; two years later, Brazil declared its independence. The new nation retained close ties to Portugal and, more importantly for the textile trade, honored the terms of an existing trade agreement between Portugal and Britain. This treaty privileged British trade through differential tariffs: British goods were charged a 15 percent duty, while Portuguese goods were charged at 16 percent and all other nations' goods at 24 percent. Five years after independence, in 1827, Brazil

⁴ Robert Walsh, *Notices of Brazil in 1828 and 1829* (London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1830), 1:142-43.

⁵ Potiers Diary, letter of 12 November 1828, 32.

⁶ Potiers Diary, letter of 22 November 1828, 19.5.

and Britain extended these terms.⁷ Thus, England continued to be the primary supplier of “staple articles,” such as these single-color prints, to the Brazilian market.

The profusion of English textiles in Brazil reflected more than favorable trade agreements: British cotton textile production and finishing methods—especially printing—had exploded by the 1820s. Cotton cloth had been made in England since the seventeenth century, but cotton thread was more difficult to spin than wool or linen and so produced coarse cloth. Great Britain imported finer cotton thread from India, as well as painted, dyed, and block-printed cotton cloth. These Indian wares inspired English textile manufacturers to explore printing technology. Developments in spinning and weaving, as well as techniques for bleaching and finishing cloth, led to both the growth of domestic cotton cloth production and the value of cotton goods exported from England. Between 1780 and 1800, the volume of raw cotton imported to England increased over 800 percent, while the value of cotton exports increased over 1500 percent.⁸

In many cases, the way in which a piece of cloth was decorated—by dyeing or printing—had a greater impact on its value than the quality of the woven material itself. Textile manufacturers developed new machinery that could transfer designs from engraved metal plates or rollers to cloth, while chemists found new dyes and methods of applying them. Color fastness, the stability of color when subjected to heat and moisture, was especially important since the popularity of cotton was due in part to the ease with which it could be washed. The Potiers Diary contains sixteen references to the importance of fastness, even at the expense of other qualities. Writing in 1831, a representative of Bradshaw Wanklyn and Sons of Rio de Janeiro urged that attention to be paid to fastness: “We have shown the new patterns to some of our buyers. They approve of them, but will not make an offer for them. The colors not being fast is still an objection with many and it will be necessary to turn your attention to that subject. The very brilliancy of the colours in these prints makes our buyers suspect them, they would prefer their being permanent, although less brilliant at first.”⁹

By the end of the eighteenth century, British manufacturers were producing hundreds of thousands of yards of calico, cotton cloth printed with repeating designs in one or more colors. Their capacity for textile production far exceeded local demand, and merchants were eager to profit from the export of cotton goods. In 1832, over two hundred million yards of printed or dyed cottons left Britain for international markets. About eleven percent, or nearly twenty-four million yards, was sent directly to Brazil. Two years later, in 1834, cotton goods had grown to account for nearly half of Britain’s total exports, and Brazil had become the single largest importer of British printed cottons.¹⁰ (Figure 3.)

⁷ Louise H. Guenther, *British Merchants in Nineteenth-Century Brazil: Business, Culture, and Identity in Bahia, 1808-50* (Oxford: Centre for Brazilian Studies, University of Oxford, 2004), 10; and Manchester, *British Preëminence*, 187-203, 208-210.

⁸ Edward Baines, Jr., *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain* (London: H. Fisher, R. Fisher, and P. Jackson, 1835), 95-102, 215; Jeremy Adamson, *Calico & Chintz: Antique Quilts from the Collection of Patricia S. Smith* (Washington, D.C.: Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1997), 14-16; and Michael M. Edwards, *The Growth of the British Cotton Trade, 1780-1815* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 250.

⁹ Potiers Diary, letter of 5 March 1831, 75.5.

¹⁰ Baines, *Cotton Manufacture*, 416; D.A. Farnie, *The English Cotton Industry and the World Market 1815-1896* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 95; and Mary B. Rose, *Firms, Networks and Business Values: The British and American Cotton Industries since 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22.



Figure 3. Britain exported millions of yards of brightly colored printed cottons. In 1834, Brazil became the single largest importer of British cotton textiles. *Potiers Diary*, Col. 50, acc. 08x122, page 31.5 (1828). Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

The voluminous trade of British cotton goods to Brazil did not occur spontaneously, but was facilitated by merchants who served as intermediaries between textile producers and consumers. British firms operated in ports across South America. These merchants had specialized knowledge of local markets, transportation systems and costs, trade regulations and tariffs—the sorts of detailed, day-to-day mechanics of trade that differed from port to port and nation to nation. While in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many textile manufacturers had marketed and traded their goods directly, by the nineteenth century it was common for producers to sell or consign their wares through independent merchants or merchant firms. Not only did this allow makers to focus on production rather than distribution, it infused working capital into the industry. The slow speed of international trade and the complexity of financial transactions—systems of credits and debits were more common than cash purchases—meant that producers didn’t see a quick return on goods they marketed themselves.¹¹ In Brazil, an American merchant noted in 1841, even cash transactions required “several weeks; it is conceived even indecorous to ask for it immediately upon delivery of the article, and it is never done

¹¹ Parks, “Trade in Printed Cottons,” 45, 88.

unless the purchase be of doubtful credit.”¹² Distributors, especially those with large warehouses that bought and sold textiles in bulk, assumed the risks and rewards of long-distance transactions.

Merchants’ success required familiarity with local currency and financial practices. Although cash transactions were rare, the value of sales made on credit was measured in the local currency. In the nineteenth century, Brazil’s currency was the mil-réis, which was not tied to any other currency or monetary standard. The exchange rate between Brazilian and British currency, then, depended in part on the stability of each nation’s finances. Bradshaw Wanklyn and Sons recorded large swings in the exchange rate over a decade: the value of one mil-réis climbed from 23.5 English shillings in 1830 to 38 shillings in 1835 and fell to 31 shillings in 1841.¹³ The variable exchange rate meant that prices set in Britain and converted months later into Brazilian currency did not necessarily match local market prices. When the mil-réis was weak relative to the shilling, merchants might advise substituting less costly printed cottons for higher-priced goods. Financial reports in the Potiers Diary show that the merchants earned a five percent commission on their sales; the tariff charged to import the cloth from Britain is more than twice as costly.¹⁴



Figure 4. Merchants offered detailed critiques of the printed cottons they sold.

Sample 10 (left): “The head of this sprig is too much of a blotch & the ground-work is miserably dull.” Sample 12 (right): “The Groundwork is too much for the Pattn, it gives it a very sombre appearance, it wants some other color to enliven it.” Potiers Diary, Col. 50, acc. 08x122, page 118.5 (1840). Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

Merchants coached textile printers to produce the colors and patterns best suited to the local market and thus maximize their own earnings. The Potiers Diary offers specific comments, such as these, on the nature of the woven material and the colors and patterns of the prints. (Figure 4.) Merchants critiqued goods sold by their competitors as well. In addition to written feedback, they sometimes provided samples of their competitors’ wares. For example, an 1828 letter from Townley and Jackson of Bahia

¹² Maxwell, Wright & Co., *Commercial Formalities of Rio de Janeiro* (Baltimore: Sherwood & Co., 1841), 17.

¹³ Potiers Diary, letters of 5 May 1830, 71.5; 13 April 1835, 82.5; and 17 May 1841, 131.

¹⁴ Potiers Diary, account of sales of 30 July 1828, 11.5.

displayed a geometric print produced by Hargreaves and Dugdale of the Broad Oak printworks and commented that “the style & Colours are certainly the best we ever saw in this market.”¹⁵

In addition to their English rivals, the merchants wrote about cotton goods coming from Scotland and France. Surprisingly, there is only one mention of textiles coming from a significant competitor, the United States. In 1834, the year that Brazil became Britain’s largest buyer, the U.S. sent cotton goods worth over \$220,000 to Brazil.¹⁶

The largest U.S. merchant house operating in Rio de Janeiro at the time, Maxwell, Wright, and Company, published a handbook to trade in that province in 1828. Their guide, *Commercial Formalities of Rio de Janeiro*, promotes American trade through detailed descriptions of how to write a ship’s manifest, as shown here, the practices of Rio’s customs house, the local currency, and even local systems of measurement. *Commercial Formalities* asks American merchants to pack their goods more carefully, observing that British goods are less often damaged in transit. It also suggests that American goods were more expensive than British goods due to their superior quality, not due to the higher tariff rate. Such observations aside, the inclusion of such a detailed critique of British goods—no other nation is so scrutinized—shows that Britain’s market dominance was widely acknowledged. The British, in turn, worried about competition from North American producers and took pains to distinguish their goods. A merchant employed by James Hartley, Son and Company of Rio de Janeiro wrote in 1842 that, “The North Americans send large quantities of 29 inch Domestics to this market... which they dispose of at a much cheaper rate than the English can afford, but their goods being made up in pieces of over 30 Yards, they are not so readily disposed of.”¹⁷

There are few textual references in the Potiers Diary that indicate how the cloth was used locally; an 1830 entry compliments a style as being well-suited for jackets, which are “regularly worn here by every class of society.”¹⁸ Striped fabrics in one or more colors also appear in the Diary and in some of the relatively rare images of the early nineteenth-century Brazilian population. (Figure 5.) Other prints—especially geometric and floral designs—were used in clothing as well. Kelly Gage, in her recent work on nineteenth-century Afro-Brazilian dress, has noted that newspaper advertisements mentioning the dress of runaway female slaves often describe at least one piece of calico clothing.¹⁹

Although the Potiers Diary offers few direct references to the consumption of the cloth it documents, the larger context of the British trade to South America in the nineteenth century offers clues. Few, if any, English merchants in Brazil made their living from trade in just one type of commodity or manufactured good. There is strong evidence, in fact, that many profited from the slave trade. Between the middle of the sixteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century, about four million Africans were forcibly brought to Brazil. In 1800, nearly half of Brazil’s population was enslaved. Brazil’s nineteenth-century economy, particularly its agricultural and mined products, relied on slave labor. Slavery was only

¹⁵ Potiers Diary, letter of 30 July 1828, 12.5.

¹⁶ Samuel Hazard, ed., *Hazard’s United States Commercial and Statistical Register, Vol. 4* (Philadelphia: Wm. F. Geddes, 1842), 327.

¹⁷ Maxwell, Wright & Co., *Commercial Formalities*, 65; and James Hartley, Son & Co. to Owen Owens & Son, 12 October 1842, OWN/3/2/4/14/2, The John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester. *Commercial Formalities of Rio de Janeiro* is available online as a free Google eBook.

¹⁸ Potiers Diary, letter of 22 January 1828, 5.5.

¹⁹ Kelly Mohs Gage, “Nineteenth-Century Afro-Brazilian Women’s Dress.” *The Berg Fashion Library*. Sept. 2010. <http://www.bergfashionlibrary.com/view/bewdf/BEWDF-v2/EDch2062.xml> (accessed 27 Jul. 2012).

slightly less prevalent in urban centers: In 1803, African slaves made up nearly one-third of the population of the city of Rio de Janeiro.²⁰ The English Parliament acted in 1807 to forbid its subjects from participating in the slave trade; at this time, about half of all individuals involved in the trade were British. Britain also began discouraging other nations from continuing the trade; this was due not only to abolitionist feeling but to Britain's economic self-interest: If the end of the slave trade hindered economic production within the British empire, then other nations should be similarly restricted.²¹

Despite the urging of the British government, Brazil continued to engage in—and even accelerated—the slave trade through the first half of the nineteenth century. An 1831 ban on the trade had little effect. In 1842, the British House of Commons observed that, “at no period had the Brazilian Slave Trade been so intensively carried on as it is at the present moment.”²² Despite diplomatic pressure and the periodic harassment of Brazilian vessels by the British Royal Navy, Brazil continued to engage in the trade until 1856; emancipation occurred in 1888.²³

Manufactured goods frequently served as currency in the slave trade. Beginning in the seventeenth century, textiles were exchanged for slaves in West Africa; by the eighteenth century, they constituted about two-thirds of the cargoes of slave ships bound for Africa. This trend continued in the Brazilian slave trade of the nineteenth century. A British survey of nine trade cargoes examined in Rio de Janeiro between 1836 and 1843 found over 37,000 pieces of cloth.²⁴ A great deal of the British cotton cloth sent to Brazil must have left the country again in the holds of vessels engaged in the slave trade; otherwise, it is hard to explain why Brazil's per capita importation of British textiles was seven times the global average. The British merchants who facilitated the textile trade to Brazil, then, participated in the slave trade by providing the goods that bought and sold human beings. Robert Hesketh, formerly the British consul in Brazil, estimated in 1850 that over half of the funds British businesses had invested in Brazil or in goods being imported into Brazil supported the slave trade. Louise Guenther, a scholar of nineteenth-century British involvement in Brazil, has suggested that the financial profits of the slave trade, not the Brazilian consumer market, drew British merchants to Brazil.²⁵ The explosion of British textile exports to Brazil during the first half of the nineteenth century is therefore directly linked to the financial interests of English merchants who could not openly engage in the slave trade after 1808. It is almost certain that some of the textiles found in the Potiers Diary made their way to Africa; one multi-colored stripe, in fact, is noted as being, “a good style for the Coast of Africa with some alterations, first if they came out on more ordinary cloth & glazed. Prints for that market should never cost more than 5\$

²⁰ Manchester, *British Preëminence*, 164.

²¹ Boris Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, trans. Arthur Brakel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 18; and Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: Britain, Brazil and the Slave Trade Question 1807-1869* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), ix-x.

²² Bethell, *Abolition*, 60; and 1842 statement recorded in files of Foreign Office, 84/583, Aberdeen to Hamilton, No. 10, 4 June 1845, quoted in Manchester, *British Preëminence*, 159.

²³ Manchester, *British Preëminence*, 254-264.

²⁴ Joseph E. Inikori, “Slavery and the Revolution in Cotton Textile Production in England,” *Social Science History* 13:4 (1989), 351-52; Kenneth Morgan, “Liverpool's Dominance in the British Slave Trade, 1740-1807,” *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* ed. David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz and Anthony Tibbles (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 22; Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68; and David Eltis, “The British Contribution to the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series 32:2 (1979), 219.

²⁵ Farnie, *English Cotton Industry*, 94; and Guenther, *British Merchants*, 47-48.

@ 5\$500 p Ps [5 to 5.5 mil-réis per piece] these were sold at 7\$ for the consumption of the City” of Bahia.²⁶ (Figure 5.)

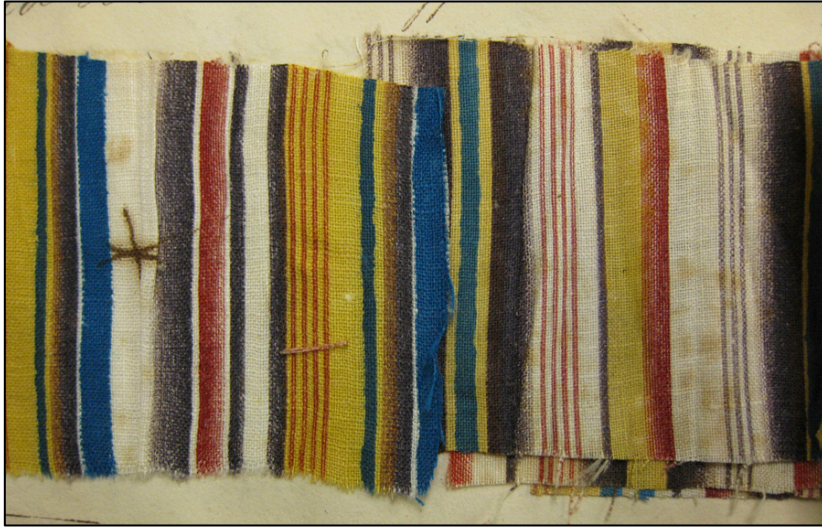


Figure 5. Multi-color stripes appear in the Potiers Diary; the cloth at the left may have been used as a trade good in the nineteenth-century Brazilian slave trade. Text in the Diary describes it as “A good style for the Coast of Africa with some alterations, first if they came out on more ordinary cloth & glazed.” Nineteenth-century illustrations of Brazilians show the use of similar cloth. Left: Potiers Diary, Col. 50, acc. 08x122, page 4 (1827). Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera. Right: “Quitandeira” [Market Woman] in [Costumes of Brazil (Rio de Janeiro: Briggs, 1840)], Detail of Pl. 9. Courtesy, The Catholic University of America, Oliveira Lima Library, Washington, D.C.

The collaboration of merchants on both sides of the Atlantic helped make Brazil one of the most important markets for British printed cottons during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The Potiers Diary articulates their specific concerns during the first years of Brazil’s independence while also suggesting ways in which to consider the longer, intertwined political and economic histories of Britain and Brazil. “By your exertions conjointly with ours,” these intermediaries between textile producers and consumers reacted to, communicated, and shaped the politics of their local communities and the broader Atlantic world.

²⁶ Potiers Diary, letter of 21 December 1827, 4.