Finding Aid to the Business papers of the Maison de Mexique and the Maison de Paris: Mexico and Paris, 1858-1898

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Note
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Collection number: BANC MSS M-B 3

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Collection Summary
Collection Title: Business papers of the Maison de Mexique and the Maison de Paris: Mexico and Paris, Date (inclusive): 1858-1898
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Repository: The Bancroft Library.
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Physical Location: For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Library's online catalog.

Abstract: Papers concerning the wholesale business in Mexico and Paris of Alfred Lefebvre, a French exporter and importer who traded with firms in France, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, the United States, and many places in Mexico. Principal exports from Mexico were agricultural products, furs, and India rubber. The papers give an excellent picture of business methods and practices of the time and the problems of operation in the absence of banking firms.
Languages Represented: Collection materials are in French

Access
Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights
Mr. Alfred Lefebvre was a retail merchant in Paris, and because he was one of those rare men who possess ambition and intelligence, he decided to go to Mexico to open another branch of his business. There is no information regarding the exact date on which he landed in Mexico but we know that he was there at least by the year 1863.

In this first period the records give little light. Gathering information here and there and making some guesses, the following facts can be stated: before 1863, there was in Mexico a wholesale and retail store called "S. Savary et Daume." It seems that Mr. S. Savary was Lefebvre's brother-in-law, because twenty years later we find that Mr. A. Lefebvre was apparently financially caring for Mr. Savary in Paris. Furthermore, they refer to each other as "brothers" in several letters, yet we know from other records that Mr. Alfred Lefebvre was an only son. The name of Alfred Lefebvre appears in the accounting records of the wholesale and retail merchants for the first time in 1863. The first letters signed by Lefebvre are of the 27th April, 1864.

Regarding the personal facts of Lefebvre's life the following may be stated: In 1859 he was the only son in his family, and his father and mother were both living. He had a sister, possibly the one who was married to Savary, who died leaving two children, a boy and a girl. There is no later reference to these children.

Mr. Lefebvre was married to a French woman, and had a child, a boy called Andres. He also had a daughter, who died when she was twelve years old. He was very much upset and gave up business for a while. When she died it is curious to note that every business letter he wrote started with the same phrase: "I am sorry to inform you that I have lost my dear daughter in Paris...." The answers to those letters started: "We have received your letter of the .... and send to you our deepest sympathy." After those phrases of introduction they started to talk business, just the same as in other letters. This mixing up of personal affairs was very common, and may be followed all through the records we have.

Andres was educated in France and in Mexico. When he was eighteen years old he entered into his father's business and in time took over its entire management. His father was very old and went to Paris where he died. Andres was married to one of the daughters of Don Manuel Fernández del Castillo y de Mier, one of the most distinguished families of Mexico. He later owned the Hacienda de San Bartolomé del Monte, inherited through his wife from her father. Later he went to Paris, where his wife died. The latest news of him was that he was still living in Paris. At present he must be over sixty years old.

The education received by Andres, the son, was without doubt much better than that of his father. Over the whole period covered by the records, we can see a continual improvement of the standards of the family. The father was a man of exceptionally good qualities, and was a representative of one of those older types of men whom we rarely see today: one of those self-made men who know the value of money, and who are extremely orderly in matters of policy and expenditures. Andres spoke three languages: French, his mother's tongue, Spanish, learned in Mexico, and English. He wrote the latter perfectly. He was a man above the average in culture.

Without any doubt Andres' marriage marked a turning point in the success of his family, for his wife was a member of one of those old aristocratic families who marry only with those of their own standing.

So much for family information. A book could be written concerning these matters, but we believe that business information is to be stressed in this report.

It is very hard to explain all the activities which Mr. Lefebvre performed. First of all, he was a wholesale and retail merchant in Paris. In the records the title "Maison de Paris" is commonly used in contrast to "Maison de Mexique" to differentiate between the businesses, the first in Paris and the latter in Mexico.

We have not very much information about the "Maison de Paris" although we know that it was managed by Lefebvre himself, and that when Lefebvre was in Mexico a power of attorney was left in Paris in charge of the business. The same was true of his "Maison de Mexique," for when he went to Paris as he often did a power of attorney was left in charge of the operation of the business in Mexico. Later, when Andres took charge of the business, Andres himself acted as a power of attorney for his father. The records indicate that the power of attorney wrote by every mail to Lefebvre. A curious thing to note is that due to the uncertainty of the mails, a copy of the letter sent by one mail was sent by the next mail to be sure it would reach its destination.
As I said before, it is difficult to follow the activities of Lefebvre through the incomplete records we possess. It would be wonderful if we could follow the entire trend of his business, but we cannot. The only things that might be described are cross sections of his business in different periods.

Mr. Lefebvre had in Mexico a wholesale and retail store, and at the same time was an exporter and importer. That business grew very fast, and by 1880 we know that he had branches all through the city (at least five different houses) all of them dependent upon and owned by Lefebvre himself. A list of the places (foreign cities) with which Lefebvre did business follows: Paris, Le Havre, Nantes, Strassburg, Hamburg, Zurich, London, Manchester, Glasgow, Windsor, Nottingtom, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco.

Besides the functions of wholesaler, retailer, exporter and importer, he handled consignments from the interior of Mexico. He performed several functions of the banker. He had open accounts for several people, some of whom were not even his regular customers. These people sent him money to be deposited to their accounts, and sent orders for payments, like checks, to be debited to those accounts. Furthermore, he often performed the functions of a special agent; people, especially from the interior of Mexico, asked him to purchase certain merchandise in other stores, or to buy a number in the next lottery, etc.

Besides all these functions he was a manufacturer. He established a plant to make "parasols, sunshades, and umbrellas" which he sold through his own stores and through others as well.

Among the principal products which he exported from Mexico were: maize, jalap, vanilla, tobacco, quitch-grass, furs and caoutchouc. The one commodity that he exported most heavily was quitch-grass, and it seems that was the one on which he made the most money. Most of these exports were to Europe, and a big percentage to France, where his "Maison de Paris" acted as an importer.

The commodities imported to Mexico were as varied as the merchandise handled by his stores.

Now some cross sections of the financial end of his business: for July 15, 1871, his balance sheet indicated that he was worth 53,461.90 pesos, and the one for January 6, 1874, showed an increase of 11,014.84. Although in September of 1876 the increase had only been of five hundred pesos. He owed to only one creditor - a sum of 58,400.60 francs.

The freight between Veracruz (Mexican port) to le Havre, for 40 cubic feet, was £1.10.

It seems that the greatest difficulty in those times was the lack of banking facilities. For example, they had to send gold instead of checks or notes. These shipments of gold were very expensive because of the difficulties of transportation to the interior of the country. (The first time that a train was mentioned was on the 19th of June of 1882). Not having trains, they employed people that were well known and of good reputation to transport money from place to place. There were other indications of the lack of banking facilities. For example, the salesman used for his personal expenses the money that was collected from the customers. The salesman sent a long letter describing to Mr. Lefebvre the difficulties of his trip to Oaxaca. (This city is within one hundred miles of Mexico City).

For this reason the Wells Fargo Company was heartily welcomed, and its success was almost immediate. Every one sent money with them, and Lefebvre often requested that the money should be sent through Wells Fargo & Co.

Now a few details regarding the marketing end of the business: they did not have standard price lists. Every time that a new customer asked for one, the clerk, many times Lefebvre himself, copied a price list. If several price lists are compared it is evident that they did not ask of every one the same price. They did have a few catalogues, which they sent to customers on occasion, asking the customers to return them. All the sales on credit were made with promissory notes, and shipments were not made unless the note was already registered in Lefebvre's books.

As a matter of policy, Lefebvre asked his employees to look around in other retail stores and inform him about new items or about prices. This appeared to Lefebvre to be a very important marketing function.

In those times legal action was so complicated and so involved that if a customer who owed money to Lefebvre became seriously ill, Lefebvre would order one of his agents to take from him all the merchandise not yet paid for. This procedure was used several times, and Lefebvre often asked of his agents concerning a customer, "Is he well? Because you know that if he is sick you should take the merchandise away from him."
It was very difficult to open any branch in a different city, because of the difficulties of the management and control. Several times it was suggested to Lefebvre that new branches should be opened, but he never wanted to do so, because of the difficulties stated above.

Lefebvre was a progressive man. He started the idea of opening temporary branches in the public markets when some festivity was to take place. These branches were opened for a limited number of days and for only four hours a day.

So much for marketing. Now for a few general facts. Lefebvre was expanding his business so fast that he had to install a merchandise elevator, but as he could find no one in Mexico who could install it, he asked for quotations from New York. Reference is frequently made to the telephone but always in the nature of a complaint.

Lefebvre was a man of business psychology. Once when he was giving instruction to his purchasing agent, he said, "The Indians prefer to sell by dozens rather than by weight, because they feel that the dozen is a much more just measurement of what they bring to sell."

The credit situation was very poor. R. G. Dunn gave Lefebvre periodical information about customers. Some of them are very picturesque. For example, they talk for half a page about a customer, and they say he is a good credit risk and so on and so forth, but they state as a footnote that "he killed someone and the police are looking for him."

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