

USING PRIVATE PAPERS IN RESEARCH

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Private papers—those documents created by individuals for their own use—are best explored not with a specific research objective in mind, but with the general intent to get a glimpse of our ancestors' world. They may provide specific genealogical information about an ancestor. They may provide information about the life of a specific ancestor. Or they may provide information about the place and time in which an ancestor resided, but without ever mentioning that ancestor.

Private papers include many types of records. There are diaries, letters, Bible records, business records, and professional records. Church papers are also private papers, but genealogists generally treat them as a research category of their own. Let's look at examples of what might be found in private papers.

BIBLE RECORDS

Early in my genealogical research efforts, I was thrilled to find the Bible record of the Conwell family “from a Bible found in Dr. Hall's garret” in a 1908 issue of the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*. The record began “Grandfather Yeates Conwell & Rebeekah his wife to North a Merecay April 15th 1699 ~~~ anker at Redy Island the same day they come,” a reminder that private papers may provide information more precious than vital dates to be entered in a database.

JOURNALS AND DIARIES

Journals and diaries have great variety in content. Some list daily events such as who visited whom or vital events. Others focus on activities of daily life, as seen in the numerous references to weaving in Martha Ballard's diary in Maine. Some—more often those of the upper or educated classes—contain personal musings, political comments, and theological discourses. Clearly, some of these were penned with the clear knowledge that they would be read by others. John Winthrop's journal was intended to become a History of New England and has been published as such.

CORRESPONDENCE

Finding correspondence can be tricky, since letters end up in the hands of the recipient. There are two categories in which we can get a more complete record from the writer's perspective. The first is published letters of a famous person, in which the editor has sought out surviving letters in collections of the recipients in a variety of institutions.

The second category is unfamiliar to researchers who have not worked in the colonial era. Many persons—particularly business, governmental, and professional men—kept what is called a “letter book” into which they or their clerk scribed a copy of each letter before it was sent. These were not confined to business matters, and often included

purely personal correspondence and personal details in business letters.

It is from the published letter book of merchant James Claypoole of London and Philadelphia, which is in the Huntington Library in California, that I learned about the not-so-nice personality of my ancestor Rachel, wife of his brother Norton. In a 1681 letter written in London to his brother Edward in Barbados, James says:

“My brother Norton's wife and her son James are gone away last week from Gravesend in a ship bound for New Jersey. We all wish her a good voyage, etc., for indeed both her relations and ours were weary of her, and my brother is to be pitied that has such a yoke-fellow, and if he has not the art of taming a shrew, he is like to live a miserable life with her.”

BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL RECORDS

There are many types of business records. Funeral home records are a category for which we can immediately see value. Store records can give us much insight into the lives of residents. Most trade was on a credit basis, with the store keeping a detailed account of the purchases and then taking payment, usually after the harvest, in money or crops. Companies that bought, sold, and shipped crops and livestock may have useful records.

In the manuscript collection at the University of Virginia Library, I found a small book headed “A List of Debts due Saml Calland for Dealing at his store on Tomahawk taken 15th Nov 1784.” My ancestor Killian Kreek lived on Tomahawk Creek in Pittsylvania County, near Calland's store. He visited the store half a dozen times in the nine months covered by the book and paid part of his bill by hauling tobacco. His purchases told me about the lives of him and his family. He bought quite a bit of cloth, shoes and shoe buckles for himself, and items indicating he owned a gun and a horse, but his food purchases were limited to small amounts of salt, “flower,” and rum.

The individuals or companies who sold land usually left extensive business records. Some ended up in state archives, others in libraries of colleges and universities, even in other states. The papers for the Burlington Company, formed in New Jersey to sell land in upstate New York, are found in the Allinson Collection in the Haverford College Special Collections in Pennsylvania. From documents in the file, I learned how the earliest settlers of the Otego Patent in New York made the trek through the wilderness and chose their land.

The records of doctors, lawyers, and ministers are an important class of private papers. The medical notebook of John Winthrop Jr. at the Massachusetts Historical Society, has helped several genealogists persistent enough to decipher his notations solve knotty genealogical problems. I was thrilled to find one of Patrick Henry's account books (there are at two: one at the Valentine Museum in

Richmond, the other at the Library of Virginia) published in a Louisa County quarterly and learn that my ancestor Thomas Allman had paid him 15 shillings. Unfortunately, like many account books, it recorded financial transactions with no details and no case appears in the court minute book to answer the question “Why?”

There is also a major category of what might be called semiprivate papers. Notaries public and justices of the peace received official appointments, yet the functions they performed—scribing letters, business transactions, and documents such as wills and deeds—were for private individuals. Notaries and JPs had official status when documents such as acknowledgments were presented at court or recorded in, say, deed books.

Many notaries and JPs kept private records of their actions, ranging from one-line abstracts of the action to full transcripts of everything they did. In early New Eng-

land, for example, we rely on the records of notaries Thomas Lechford and William Aspinwall, both of which have been published, for information and clues about our ancestors. Aspinwall’s notarial records reference Elizabeth Whitehead of Lemington Priors (in Warwickshire, England), mother of my ancestor John Whitehead. I followed up on this clue and found his baptism there, giving me the name of his father, which in turn led to the marriage of his parents in an adjoining parish.

NEXT STEPS

Many private papers, which started out in private hands, are now accessible to us in private collections, public archives, and published form. In FINDING PRIVATE PAPERS, we will look at the often-complicated subject of how you can locate private papers.