RESEARCH COLUMN
Research Collections in New Jersey: The Papers of William Paterson

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As New Jersey’s first Attorney General, delegate to the Constitutional Convention, senator, second governor, and Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, William Paterson can be counted among the state’s First Citizens. Paterson’s career in public life spanned almost thirty years. But despite his many accomplishments, Paterson’s importance in the early history of the state and the nation has only become widely known within the past twenty-five years. As late as 1979, historian John O’Connor noted that, contains numerous epigrams and aphorisms taken from popular literature such as the Guardian and Spectator.

While this void was substantially filled by O’Connor’s authoritative biography, primary source material for the study of Paterson remains dispersed among three libraries in New Jersey. For the librarian who is asked about Paterson’s life and career, O’Connor’s book remains the single best scholarly source. For researchers, I have attempted a brief overview of the Paterson papers, with references to his career, held by the three repositories—Princeton, Rutgers, and William Paterson College—in order to provide additional information beyond the brief entries listed in Mary R. Murrin’s New Jersey Historical Manuscripts, (1987).

Princeton University - Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Firestone Library

Most of this collection covers Paterson’s college days at Princeton and his early legal training. Paterson graduated from Princeton in the class of 1763 at age eighteen. “Paterson viewed college as the place to perfect the polite accomplishments, to smooth out the rough edges of character, and to gain proficiency in eloquence and oratorical skills.” Included are college compositions and essays on conduct, honor, personal appearance, lying, and dancing, which Paterson wrote as a student and as a member of the Closopathic Society, a literary club he helped revive after graduation.

A knowledge of history and the classics was essential for the education of a gentleman, a fact which survives in Paterson’s Commonplace Book. In this book of memorabilia Paterson carefully transcribed quotations from Swift, Pope and Voltaire, among others. He also included brief biographical and character sketches of such figures as Julius Caesar, Anthony and Cicero. The book

William Paterson College - Special Collection Room, Sarah B. Askew Library

The largest of the Paterson collections is maintained by the Sarah B. Askew Library. Although this collection constitutes approximately twenty-five percent of the Paterson papers which exist, it is neither widely known nor frequently used. One reason is that the collection did not become generally available to scholars until recently. In 1978 the collection was obtained at auction by the college’s Alumni Association from the estate of Edward J. Grassman of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Over ninety percent of the collection is legal material which is the bailiwick of highly specialized scholars. The collection consists of some 700 individual unbound leaves of manuscript materials, three vellum documents, seven bound volumes and two bound pamphlets, the majority of which are case notes, legal opinions, and records of testimony. The material concentrates on the years 1776-1791 when Paterson
came to prominence as a leader of the Revolution in New Jersey and was appointed the state's first Attorney General.

Since there were few sittings of the Supreme Court during the war years, much of the legal activity was handled by the county courts. Paterson believed that the failure of these courts to adequately administer and enforce the law contributed to the social upheaval experienced at that time. As Attorney General, Paterson travelled throughout New Jersey attending county courts. His case notes, opinions, pleas and indictments relative to these 115 cases brought before the courts of Oyer and Terminer, Pleas, and Chancery reflect the nature of litigation during the period. The cases range from fornication, theft, and land settlements, to high treason. Also included are County Court Dockets from 1782-1787 and the New Jersey Supreme Court Dockets from 1781-1807. These are arranged chronologically and provide the names of litigants, case notes and trial dates.

A second series of twenty-one cases from 1793-1806 are Federal Circuit Court Cases and include several in which Paterson was involved while on the Supreme Court. Two noteworthy cases arose from the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania and helped the Court enhance the authority of the central government, a main objective of the Marshall Court.

The Paterson collection is available on microfilm during regular library hours: Monday - Thursday 8-10, Friday till 4 p.m., Saturday 9-5, Sunday 12-6. No appointment is necessary to view the microfilm, but researchers should call in advance to use the actual papers.

These essays have been transcribed and are also available at the Sarah B. Askey Library.

The Alexander Library has consolidated most of the New Jersey Paterson material, either in photocopy or microfilm (not always of good quality), from the Firestone and Askew Libraries. Since its New Jersey historical collections are extensive, despite the problem of archival description, it is recommended as the place to begin any research on Paterson.

The New Jersey Archives and Special Collections Room is open Monday-Friday from 9-5 and Saturday from 1-5. Appointments are not required.

Needless to say, scanning archival collections can never inform an entire life. The sum is always greater than its

Rutgers University - New Jersey Archives and Special Collections Room, Alexander Library

Rutgers University maintains a large and diverse collection of correspondence, essays, business transactions and legal material covering primarily the years 1780-1804. The letters are arranged chronologically and range from a farmer's requesting permission to fence and manure his lands to Supreme Court matters written by John Marshall. A brief list of the materials is available, but there is no finding aid or calendar to the correspondence, almost all of which are letters received by Paterson. Rather, the letters are indexed under the name of the sender, making them difficult to access as they relate to Paterson.

This collection includes a folio-size bound volume which contains some 700 pages of Paterson's draft revising and codifying the laws of New Jersey, published in 1800. Begun in 1792 while he was governor, the Laws of the State of New Jersey represents Paterson's effort to reform and rationalize the legal system which had previously been a confusion of colonial laws, British statutes, and acts passed by the new state governments. Many of the new laws recommended by Paterson exemplified the humanitarian nature of the new social order emerging under the reorganized state governments.

During his tenure as Governor, Paterson began a series of essays in the form of letters written to local newspapers. Written under the names Aurelius and Horatius, this letterbook represents his mature, conservative thought on issues confronting the state and nation, such as parties and politicians, foreigners, elections, and an independent judiciary, parts, and this is especially true in a life as important and varied as Paterson's. The Paterson papers in the collections of Princeton, William Paterson College, and Rutgers are significant holdings. A smaller collection exists at the New Jersey Historical Society while almost thirty percent of the extant Paterson papers await the researcher at the Library of Congress.

References