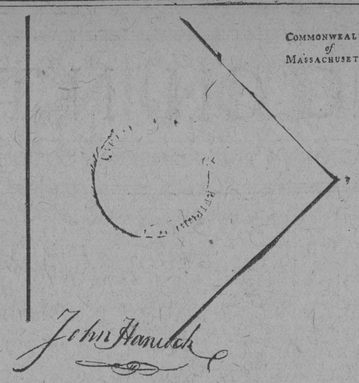
PAPERS FROM THE PAST

TREASURES THAT TELL OF OTHER TIMES IN THE STRAUS COLLECTION OF HISTORIC DOCUMENTS



Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

By his EXCELLENCY

John Hancock, Esq.

GOVERNOR of the COMMONWEALTH of MASSACHUSETTS.

To Aaron Hobart Jr. Gentleman GREETING.

YOU being appointed Captain of a Company on the third Regiment of the first Brigade and fifth Division of the Militia of this Commonwealth, comprehending the Counties of Plymouth, Barnstable, Bristol, Dukes County & Nantucket, By Virtue of the Power vested in me, I do by these Presents, (reposing special Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct) Commission you accordingly.—You are therefore carefully, and diligently to discharge the Duty of a Captain -- in leading, ordering, and exercising said Company in Arms, both inferior Officers and Soldiers; and to keep them in good Order and Discipline: And they are hereby commanded to obey you, as their Captain And you are yourself to observe and follow such Orders and Instructions, as you shall from Time to Time receive from me, or your superior Officers.

GIVEN under my Hand, and the Seal of the said Commonwealth, the Sixteenth Day of July in the Year of our LORD, 1792 and in the Seventeenth Year of the Independence of the United States of AMERICA.

John Hancock

By His Excellency's Command,

John Avery Jun. Secy.

COMMISSION SIGNED BY JOHN HANCOCK

Franklin Pierce,

President of the United States of America.

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, Greeting:

Know Ye, that reposing special Trust and Confidence in the Patriotism, Valour, Fidelity and Ability of William Sharp, I have nominated, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, do appoint him a Lieutenant in the Navy, from the 15th of September 1855, in the service of the UNITED STATES. He is therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the Duties of a Lieutenant, by doing and performing all Manner of Things thereto belonging. And I do strictly charge and require all Officers, Seamen and Marines, under his Command to be obedient to his Orders as a Lieutenant. And he is to observe and follow such Orders and Directions from time to time as he shall receive from me, or the future PRESIDENT of the United States of America, or his Superior Officer set over him, according to the Rules and Discipline of THE NAVY. This COMMISSION to continue in force during the pleasure of the President of the United States for the time being.

Given under my Hand at Washington, this Twenty Fourth day of July in the year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Fifty Six and in the Eighty First year of the Independence of the United States.

Franklin Pierce

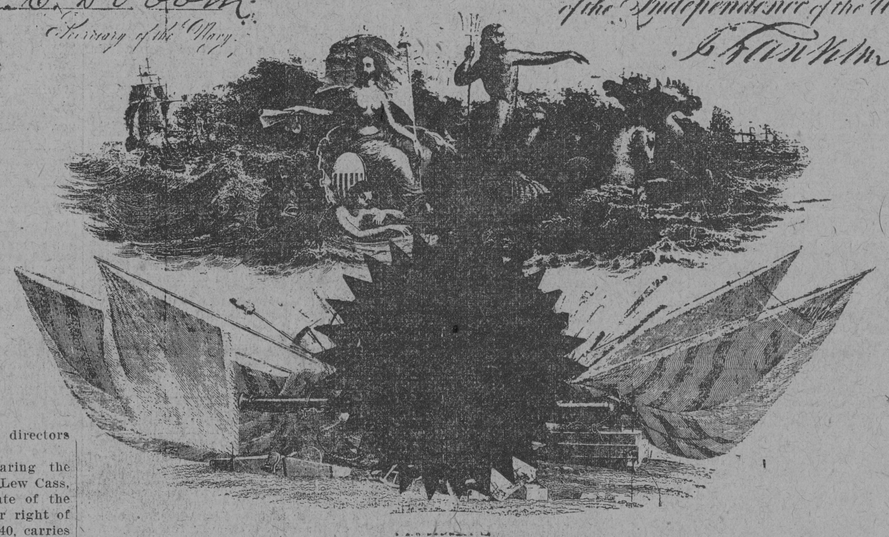
By the President

J. C. Dobbin

Secretary of the Navy.

Registered No. 34 - the lowest number of same date to his credit.

J. Pettibone



AN APPOINTMENT SIGNED BY PRESIDENT PIERCE

BY JAMES M. YOUNG.

ONE of the most remarkable collections of autograph letters and historical documents in the country is to be found right here in Baltimore. It is the Straus Collection of Historic Documents, the property of Philip Gutman Straus, 1628 Eutaw Place, and is the result of 17 years of collecting on the part of Mr. Straus.

One has but to glance through the carefully indexed and classified documents to realize that the result of Mr. Straus' efforts is no ordinary collection, but one which deserves to rank with the foremost private collections of the land. It includes letters and documents written or signed by United States presidents, cabinet officers, army and navy officials, members of the nobility, authors, artists and sculptors, renowned physicians, eminent lawyers, opera singers, actors, musicians and an almost complete set of documents signed by barons of Baltimore, lords proprietary and governors of Maryland from Charles Calvert, third Lord Baltimore, to the Hon. Philips Lee Goldsborough, present chief executive of the state.

It is only possible to enumerate and comment briefly upon a few of Mr. Straus's treasures, for to describe them all would require volumes. Suppose we glance first in the section devoted to the presidents, beginning with the Father of His Country. We note first a lease signed in 1767 by George Washington. It appears that it was obtained from a James Cocke, of Williamsburg, for a piece of property, the boundaries of which are designated by a number of old landmarks, and it bequeaths the estate, in the event of Washington's death, to John Custis, son of Daniel Custis, the first husband of Washington's wife.

There are some "clearance papers," signed by John Adams, which also bear the signature of Samuel Pickering. Some of these clearance papers are of particular interest because of their connection with the pirates which once infested the Barbary coast before the days of Decatur and his associates. It seems that each of the ocean robbers, who were bribed by the United States government not to molest a Yankee vessel, possessed a small piece of wood, so cut that it would exactly fit the curving top of the papers belonging to the ships of the young nation. When a ship was boarded the papers were taken out and in case the wood could exactly fit their tops the vessel was allowed to sail on unmolested; otherwise, woe betide those on board.

Signed by Jefferson.

Of the many clearance papers in Mr. Straus' collection the most interesting perhaps is one which bears an original Savage engraving signed by none other than Thomas Jefferson, and incidentally James Madison, then secretary of state.

The fourth president—James Madison—on April 6, 1816, signed a paper giving to one James Dillard, a captain in the United States Army, a 10-acre tract of land as a reward for three years' military service, and today the paper rests in Mr. Straus' collection near a right of navigation, to which James Monroe affixed his signature when he was in the president's chair in 1818. The document was countersigned by John Quincy Adams, then secretary of state, and it confers the privilege of sailing from New York to the West Indies upon Lloyd Bowers, master of the brig Active.

Especially interesting today is the letter from James Wiggen, of New York, to James Monroe, when he was secretary of state. The letter deals with the great question of the hour—the War of 1812—and it reads in part:

"I am not very sanguine that peace will be the result, although Great Britain has done more than I thought she would have done, by sending out overtures. I am fearful that she is playing the old game over again, and that she is not desirous of such a peace as will be honorable to the United States, but hope that I am mistaken. It may prove that she only wishes to throw the odium of the war on the American government, and to make the people of England believe that America still insists on abandonment of British maritime rights, which she considers to be essential to her existence as an independent nation."

Mr. Straus also possesses the original patent for certain improvements in the loom, the invention of Edmund Cartwright in 1785. These improvements were originated by Horace Baker, who signed the patent, as did John Quincy Adams; Henry Clay, the secretary of state; William Wirt, the first attorney general of the nation, and George W. Cartwright, the witness.

Another treasure which reminds us of J. Q. Adams is to be found in a letter written by him to Langdon Cheves, who was, from 1819 to 1822, president of the Bank of the United States, indited for the purpose of appointing the directors for the ensuing year.

Another is a document bearing the names of Andrew Jackson and Lew Cass, his secretary of war. The date of the signing was 1836. Still another right of navigation, bearing the date 1840, carries the signatures of Martin Van Buren, then President, and his secretary of state, John Forsyth, and grants permission to a captain of a New York vessel to sail for Jamaica. It is to be noted, too, because the great seal of the government is affixed.

William Henry Harrison's Check.

William Henry Harrison is represented by a check drawn on June 20, 1815, when he was a prosperous farmer in Virginia, unknown to fame. The paper was signed in Cincinnati and is drawn on the Miami Exporting Company for the amount of $20, payable to W. Irwin. In appearance the check is very similar to those in use today.

AN EARLY REAPER MADE IN BALTIMORE

The death of President Harrison occurred on August 4, 1841, when the distinguished man was 68 years of age. The news reached Baltimore through messages carried by horseback news carriers in an amazingly short time. The Straus collection contains an editorial clipped from the old Baltimore Patriot and Commercial Gazette of April 5, 1841, which indicates the high esteem in which the dead President was held in this city. It reads:

"The painful intelligence reached this city yesterday morning that William Henry Harrison had departed this life. For several days past there has been deep and pervading anxiety in the public mind in regard to the illness of the beloved patriot and its probable issue and this anxiety depicted as it was on every countenance, received measureable relief, or deeper impress, from day to day, from hour to hour, according to the varying accounts from the seat of government afforded or withheld ground of hope of a favorable termination. But hope and fear at length are merged into the reality of visitation. William Henry Harrison, the faithful and long-tried public servant, the venerated patriot, the beloved chief, so lately called to its highest office by a free people, is no more. The event, which gives pain to the nation and shrouds the whole world in gloom, took place at 30 minutes before 1 o'clock on the morning of the 4th instant."

An account of the death of the President and a copy of the resolutions adopted by Congress relative to it in the form of a press dispatch follows the editorial. The set of resolutions has appended to it many famous names, among them that of Daniel Webster.

It appears from other clippings from the same paper that the Maryland Cadets resolved to attend the funeral of Mr. Harrison in a body. The following extract from an article which appeared on the day following the funeral tells of how they were thwarted in their resolve:

"We are requested to state that this company, much to their regret, were unable to join the military escort of General Harrison, yesterday morning, in consequence of an alteration being about to be made in their military caps, which deprives them of their present use."

John Tyler, tenth president of the United States, was noted for his kind heartedness, one manifestation of which is to be found exemplified among the papers in the possession of Mr. Straus. It is in the shape of a warrant, which reads as follows:

"I hereby authorize and direct that the secretary of state affix the seal of the United States to the pardon of John Harrington. Dated this day and signed by me, and for so doing, this shall be his warrant.

(Signed) "JOHN TYLER.

"President of the United States of America.

"Washington, December 3, 1844."

James K. Polk's Signature.

Mr. Straus has a splendid signature of James K. Polk. It is found on the bottom of a navigation paper, which was drawn up June 12, 1848. James Buchanan, at the time secretary of state, and later president, countersigned the document. Mr. Straus also owns a letter written by Polk in regard to the distribution of the Congressional Globe.

When Zachary Taylor was a brigadier general in the United States Army he wrote a letter from Fort King to Gov. T. R. Gilmer, of Georgia, stating that the commanding officer on the Florida frontier had been authorized by the secretary of war to call on the governor for assistance in the campaign against the troublesome Indians. The letter bears the date March 9, 1839, and may be seen with the hundreds of equally fascinating documents.

Fillmore, one of the less interesting presidents, signed several state papers which have found their way into the Straus collection. The next incumbent of the coveted position was Pierce. A large sheet of parchment, dated 1855, which is the official appointment of William Sharp to the rank of lieutenant in the United States Navy, contains his signature, and is countersigned by the secretary of war at the time, J. C. Dobbin. Enclosed in the appointment is a letter written by President Pierce, recommending the Hon. James J. Roane for a government position. The man recommended probably deserved what was said of his abilities, for he was a member of a fine old Virginia family, and was quite famous in his day.

Among the most interesting Pierce souvenirs is the postcard which is simply signed Frank Pierce, N. H., written when the future president was a representative from New Hampshire. It is sandwiched in with several others signed by the same distinguished statesman.

A tiny little note, which once accompanied a photograph of President James Buchanan, and was written by the president, forms part of the collection. It reads thus:

"My Dear Miss Rucker: I send you my likeness, although it is not believed that Mr. Hendrick has been happy in its execution. It will serve, however, to remind you of one who will ever remember Miss Rucker with devoted friendship and sincere respect. Yours truly,

JAMES BUCHANAN.

Washington, September 7, 1847.

One may see Abraham Lincoln's signature on several documents which Mr. Straus has found, among them being an appointment commissioning Lloyd Beall to the rank of general in the Union Army. The document also bears the names of Simon Cameron and Lorenzo Thomas, who was then himself a general in the Union Army. The deep creases and stains noted on the commission are due to the fact that it was carried about by the General in his pocket during the war. Whether he was ever actually wounded himself or not is not known, but certain it is that the dark brown stains on the paper were made by the blood of some human being.

With the commission in the folder is a copy of the Amnesty Oath, which reads thus:

"I do solemnly swear or affirm, in the presence of God, that I will henceforth defend the Constitution of the United States and the Union of States thereunder and that I will in like manner abide by and faithfully support all laws and proclamations which have been made during the existing rebellion with reference to the emancipation of slaves. So help me God." The oath is signed by J. H. Zug.

Johnson, the next president in order, signed an appointment of a lieutenant in the United States Navy on February 18, 1869, and the appointment may be studied in the collection. The paper was also signed by Hugh McCulloh, who was secretary of the Treasury under Johnson. With the commission are two tickets which were designed to admit their bearers to the impeachment proceedings of the same president. They bear the date of April 6, 1868, and were formerly the property of George T. Brown, who was sergeant-at-arms during the famous trial.

Johnson's Impeachment.

There are not many papers in the entire collection of more value than the large vellum sheet which bears the signatures of 53 of the senators who were present at the Fortieth Congress when Johnson was on trial for impeachment. The valuable document was secured by Mr. Browne, who went to each of the distinguished men and induced them to affix their names to the paper. The document is signed by the entire Congress, with the exception of Howard, of Michigan, who was absent on that particular day. Here are a few of the famous names taken at random which may be read on the interesting document: Benjamin F. Wade, of Ohio, president pro tem of the Senate; George Vickers, of Maryland; Charles Sumner, of Massachusetts; Reverdy Johnson, of Maryland; John Sherman, of Ohio, who was later secretary of the Treasury; W. P. Fesseden, of Maine; James A. Bayard, of Delaware; Roscoe Conkling, of New York; Simon Cameron, of Pennsylvania; Thomas A. Hendricks, of Indiana, later vice president, and Henry Wilson.

On May 1, 1871, Ulysses S. Grant indited the following letter to Prof. E. M. Gallaudet, then president of the National Deaf Mute College in Washington:

"Dear Sir: I am in receipt of your letter of April 21. I believe the institution for the benefit of the deaf and dumb is doing and will do great good to those unfortunate persons throughout our country.

"I regret that Congress did not appropriate the amount of money necessary to place the institute on a permanent basis.

"Yours respectfully,

"U. S. GRANT."

There are a number of documents of various kinds which were signed by Rutherford B. Hayes, but those which follow them are of far greater interest to the majority of the public. Garfield's name is affixed to a letter of introduction written for a young man, and there are several others similar to it, written by the ill-fated president. Along with these letters is to be seen a card on one side of which appears the name Charles Guiteau, the man who assassinated Garfield in the station in Washington, and on the other side is written George Scoville. Scoville was the Chicago lawyer who defended Guiteau in the trial, which was necessary, previous to his execution.

The signature of Guiteau reveals the fact that he was not by any means an uneducated man. It appears to have been written by a man of intellect and character and nothing about it is indicative of the distorted brain which so tragically led astray the man. As the reader will doubtless recall, Guiteau shot Garfield on account of his hatred of him, which began when the President refused to appoint him to the position of American consul at Marseilles. Excited partially by this failure, and partially by the political conflict which was being waged between Garfield and Roscoe Conkling, he shot the President down on July 2, 1881.

One may study the signature of President Arthur to be found on certain letters directing the secretary of state to append the great seal of the United States to envelopes containing letters to His Imperial and Royal Majesty, Francis Joseph, Emperor of Austria, King of Bohemia, etc., appointing Alfonso Taft, father of the President who has just ceased to direct the ship of state, E. E. and M. P. of the United States.

A warrant, in which Bayless W. Hanna is authorized to sign the treaty of extradition with the Argentine Republic, and dated 1886, shows the signature of Grover Cleveland.

Autographed Photographs.

A series of documents directing the Secretary of State to affix seals on warrants, one of which calls for a constitutional pardon of William S. Parks, who was suspected of being a spy, are signed by Benjamin Harrison. Another very interesting document is an appointment of a notary, which is also signed by Benjamin Harrison, and countersigned by W. H. H. Miller, attorney general. Several autograph letters of the martyred president, William McKinley, constitute an interesting part of the collection.

Mr. Straus also has a letter from ex-President Theodore Roosevelt thanking him for a copy of a letter which he possesses, written by an uncle of the ex-President, Mr. Robert B. Roosevelt, at that time a member of The Hague. The letter was written to Mr. Hallock, then editor of a Washington newspaper. It reads as follows:

"My Dear Mr. Hallock—I am glad to hear from you and that you are still fishing and shooting. I had been a Democrat until last year. The wild extravagance of Bryan and his populistic associates force me to McKinley. I can go there easily now, for Bryan is just as crazy about 16 to 1 as ever. Besides, Theodore is half a Democrat, and will keep the administration right. The tail will wag the dog. I have been at Paris non-Exposition. There may be one in September. Sincerely,

"R. B. ROOSEVELT."

As events show, this prophecy was fulfilled.

Mr. Straus has also several autographs of President Taft. On the walls of his room hang beautiful autographed photographs of the present President and Roosevelt and Taft, with all of whom Mr. Straus has corresponded.

We have only glanced through that part of the wonderful collection devoted particularly to the various presidents. Let us glance at a few of the other treasures. To name them all is out of the question, for there are over 2,000 specimens in the collection.

Among the many letters is one written to Senator Vickers, of Maryland, by Governor Bradford.

"On Thursday last," it reads, "22 Oct., Mr. Reverdy Johnson and myself were with the president (Lincoln) in reference chiefly to other matters, and Johnson said to him that an apprehension existed with some of our citizens that the military would be allowed to interfere with the election. The President apparently hooted the idea, said that no such purpose was entertained, nor had he received any intimation of any desire to that effect. With this assurance from the President it would hardly be necessary or proper for me to interpose any remonstrance against the use of force as I certainly should not hesitate to do, did reasonable grounds exist for such an apprehension."

The great, sprawling signature of John Hancock, so prominent on the Declaration of Independence, is in the possession of Mr. Straus on a captain's appointment in the Third Regiment of the militia of the commonwealth of Massachusetts, dated July 16, 1792.

Washington on the War.

What is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and valuable of all the papers in the collection is a letter to the Committee for Co-operation of the Continental Congress, which was in session in Philadelphia from 1778 to 1783, to which is appended the signature of none other a personage than Gen. George Washington. It is as follows:

Headquarters, July 13, 1780.

Gentlemen—

We have received intelligence; through different channels from New York, that the Gaudeloupe had arrived there on Sunday morning, and brought an account that she had fallen in with a large French fleet, consisting of several sail of the line, and a number of transports, between the Capes of Virginia and Delaware. This intelligence has every appearance of authenticity; and if true; the arrival of the Fleet on the Coast, may instantly be looked for. This indeed must be the case, at any rate, from the time they are said to have sailed. It cannot be too much lamented that our preparations are still so greatly behind hand. Not a thousand men that I have heard of, have yet joined the army, and in all probability the period for commencing our operations is at hand. I am happy to learn that a spirit of animation has diffused itself throughout the states, from which we may expect the happiest consequences. But the exigency is so pressing that we ought to multiply our efforts to give new activity and despatch to our measures—levying and forwarding the men, providing the supplies of every sort required; forage and transportation demand particular attention.

After what has been preconcerted with the Honorable The Congress after two months previous notice of the intended succour, if our allies find us unprepared, and are obliged to wait several weeks in a state of inaction, it is easy to conceive how unfavorable the impression it will make of our conduct. Besides this, the season is exceedingly advanced—a decisive enterprise, if our means are equal to it, will not permit us to lose a moment of the time left for military operations, which if improved with all the vigor in our power is less than were to be wished for an undertaking of so arduous and important a nature—So much is at stake—so much to be hoped—so much to be lost—that we shall be inexcusable if we do not employ all our zeal and all our exertions.

With the highest respect and esteem—

I have the honour to be Gentlemen, your most obedient and honourable servant—

GEORGE WASHINGTON.

This intensely interesting letter was apparently written by David Humphreys, one of Washington's aids, at the dictation of his superior officer.

In looking through the collection one must not miss the letter written July 20, 1787, by Dyre Kearney, delegate to the Continental Congress from Delaware, in which he says, among many other interesting things:

"I did not arrive here until the 10th inst. Congress again assembled on the Fourth of July—and by the arrival of Pennsylvania and Delaware since, we are now increased to nine states—". We have indeed grown and waxed strong since that early day!

Hussey's Reaper.

That O. Hussey, who lived in Baltimore and not Cyrus Hall McCormick, was the inventor of the reaper, seems to be proven by an advertisement of a reaping machine which bears a date earlier than the date generally ascribed to the appearance of the latter's machine. Both men made their ideas public in 1832, but Hussey was a few months ahead of his rival. The advertisement which Mr. Straus owns presents an excellent cut of the invention on one side, while on the other is a letter written by Hussey describing one of his inventions—a corn sheller.

It is a temptation to run on and on and on! Scores of the fascinating documents, newspaper clippings, letters and similar objects, all of them connected in some way with a famous man or woman, are filed away in the collection, but an article must end somewhere, and no doubt this is the best place to leave the treasures for the present at least.

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