

Using Manuscript Collections in Your Research

By Michael J. Leclerc

There are many jewels to be found in rare book and manuscript collections. One vastly important difference between rare books and manuscript collections is that rare books are generally published materials while manuscript collections usually are unpublished. It is not uncommon, however, to find in a manuscript collection an author's research materials that he or she then used to publish a book. NEHGS has many such collections. The wonderful thing about manuscript collections is that you never know what you will find in them. I have seen everything from notes on families carefully written in *Register* format to scraps of information written on the backs of envelopes. While many collections may have indexes, it is more common to find them not indexed. At most, a finding aid or inventory will be prepared to locate different parts of large collections.

Manuscripts need not be dusty old papers either. Some manuscript collections include carefully prepared charts and family histories printed on computer in the last decade. Cemetery transcriptions, church records, vital records, and photographs can all be found. Captains' logs, broadsides, heraldic drawings, and other materials are also there. The NEHGS collection contains over 3,500 linear feet of manuscripts. Among the more interesting pieces of our collection are an original census book from Norfolk County, Massachusetts in 1840 and the history of a small Central Massachusetts town written in the 1860s that contains graphic opinions of the inhabitants' character from the author's perspective. The following examples from the NEHGS collection will give you some idea of what awaits you in these boxes and envelopes.

In the previous column it was mentioned that many early diaries have been published. Many additional diaries and journals that have not been published have been donated to institutions and kept in manuscript collections. The diary of Jesse Tilson of Stoughton, Massachusetts, is a fascinating glimpse into the taking of Fort Louisbourg from the French:

Thursday June ye 28th [1759] in the morning the wind was at East and it Raind at about nine o clock the wid shiftedand Blew at N: W: and upon flood tide the frigget Drouie of from G [?] Island and we landed our cattle upon the island and I saw a great many acers of wheet, and a great many acers of peas and all the french were gon of the island and carried of all the housestuf and cattle and Left their houses standing their was seven Mass houses upon the island and in sum places ye houses stood verry thick upon ye island & at night they sent down six fire ships.¹

The papers also include provenance showing how the diary passed from owner to owner and finally ended up at NEHGS.

You will also find books that contain a mixture of handwritten pages, typewritten pages, newspaper articles (both loose and pasted in), and other materials. The papers of William P. Brechin, M.D., of Boston contain one such book, which is entitled *The History of Kings County, Nova Scotia* (1910). Among the many notations in the book is the following story:

I John Lowden of Cornwallis in Kings County do hereby confess That whereas sometime past I have rashly and inadvertently uttered and published a scandalous report of the Rev. James Murdock importing he was disguised with liquor at the dwelling house of Mr. Samuel Starr in Cornwallis which report although I at that time imagined from appearances might be true yet from sufficient evidence I am now fully convinced that my suspicions of Mr. Murdock's being at that time anyways affected or disguised with liquor were false and groundless and that my publishing such a report

has greatly injured Mr. Murdock's character and reputation I do therefore hereby further humbly fully and freely acknowledge and confess my fault in publishing such report and heartily beg pardon of the said Mr. James Murdock for the injury I have done him and of all good people who have been offended thereby

John Lowden

Signed in presence of

William Dickson

D. Sherman Denison

Horton March 24, 1768²

This is followed by a similar confession signed by Samuel Starr dated the same day. While insightful into the characters of the individuals named, there is a problem with this. The first confession starts on the first line of the page. In the top margin was written: "From Nova Scotia Gazetter of March 24, 1768 Halifax March 31st 1768."

Unfortunately these words are then crossed out. Was this a transcription from a newspaper account or did Mr. Brechin see the original letters? It is impossible to tell from the information contained in the book, which itself appears to be a large number of disparate pages that were once bound together. The surrounding pages are narratives of different stories and shed no light on this entry. Materials such as this are quite common in manuscript collections. While the book's clue may give a researcher reason to find the newspaper mentioned to see if there are more clues contained within, the information itself must be further researched to determine its validity.

Another benefit of manuscript collections is that they may contain references to materials that are no longer extant or whose current whereabouts is unknown. Benjamin G. Gray wrote a seven-page history of the Gray family entitled, "Account of the Early Members of the family of Revd. B. G. Gray late of St. John N.B. deceased especially those in and from Massachusetts." It is dated 9 January 1861, and contains information on individuals from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is quite likely that the author actually knew many of the individuals born and living in the late 1700s and thus the information contained about them could be first-hand knowledge. In addition, the account starts out:

Benjamin Gray of Boston Mass: died in 1741 or 1742: he was the eldest son, and his father the eldest son of his father. About 1738 or 9 this Benjamin Gray received letters from England from a favorite uncle named John Gray of Westminster informing him that he was the next heir to the title and Estate in England. Being however a very great famous bigotted New Light, he wrote back that he would not quit his New Light System to be King of England: and shortly after died, as above mentioned, without male issue.³

The above extracted from a letter of Joseph Gray, (a grand nephew of said Benjn Gray) who was born in Massachusetts, but subsequently settled in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as a merchant in the firm of Proctor & Gray

A side notation shows that the letter was written 8 February 1799. It is quite conceivable that the original letter is now lost to time. If it does exist, it could be difficult or impossible to locate. It may still be in private hands. Sixty-two years after it was written, however, Benjamin Gray allows us to know the contents of that letter and the interesting information contained therein. If he hadn't recorded this correspondence, we may have never known about his namesake.

Transcriptions of original records are often found in manuscript collections. Before the age of microfilm in the second

half of the twentieth century, the only way to examine original records was to travel to the repository where they were held. Transcribing original records was a very popular pastime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These transcriptions allowed more people to view the information contained in the original records without having to travel to examine it. In the United States, many typescripts were created by members of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Many were also made by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and deposited at local libraries. Individuals, however, created a huge number of transcriptions that eventually made their way to the author's local libraries. Among the transcriptions in the NEHGS collection is a typescript of the Township Book for Aylesford, Nova Scotia and land records of the King's Grant in Clements, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia in 1784. One might also find photocopies of original records such as those of the Township of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, which were given to NEHGS.

You may wonder why anyone would want to look at transcriptions or photocopies when microfilm copies of original records are now so easily available. There are several reasons why. First, unless you live in Salt Lake City, there is a great likelihood that the films you want to view will have to be rented. It would be nice to view a transcription of the records first to see if the information you are looking for is even in those records. If they contain nothing useful, you could end up saving yourself a considerable amount of money. Even if microfilmed copies of the originals are available, they may be difficult to read. Having a transcription available that was made by viewing the actual documents may make it easier for you to read what you see on the film. Also, parts of the original records may have been lost or destroyed after they were transcribed but before they were microfilmed.

Genealogical notes on families make up the bulk of the information in the NEHGS manuscript collection. They vary in size from small folders to several archive boxes. There are handwritten sheets of paper, index cards, bound notes and odd scraps of paper, as well as some materials generated by computer. A typical example of family records is a manuscript donated by Dorothea (Whelan) Saavedra on her Newfoundland ancestry. It is a mixture of charts, photocopies of photographs, and narrative. In the opening paragraph, she writes, "This is obviously the first 'rough draft' of a projected four part study of my father's family in Newfoundland. There are many mistakes and empty spaces which will be rectified and filled in time." ⁴ As is the case with many manuscripts, there is no citation of sources, meaning that all information contained therein would need to be confirmed through primary sources. It is, however, a good place to start. Especially for a place like Newfoundland where few microfilmed records are available outside of the Province.

How can manuscripts be located? One major resource is the [National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections \[NUCMC\]](#). Sponsored by the Library of Congress, NUCMC catalogs manuscript collections at many smaller repositories that may not have the resources to publish their holdings. Larger repositories often have their catalogs on the Internet. Many institutions have also published catalogs of their manuscript collections at different times, such as *The Catalog of Manuscripts of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1969).

When checking catalogs also make sure to check for limitations on access. Some collections may have restrictions stipulated by the donor. Repositories may restrict the use of their collections in general. For example, viewing manuscripts at NEHGS is a benefit of membership. Our manuscript collection is not available to non-members. An institution may also enforce special handling rules, such as requiring the use of white gloves, book cradles, or pencils. Additionally, there may be limitations placed on the number of photocopies you can make from any individual collection.

Some of you may be interested in donating your own papers to a local repository. Here are some general guidelines to follow:

- Ask the repository for a copy of their guidelines for donating materials. Once you read them, follow them to the letter. Feel free to ask questions and discuss them with the repository staff, but remember that they have developed these guidelines for a reason.
- Go through your collection and have it neatly organized. Placing it in acid-free folders is a plus, but not absolutely necessary.
- While an index is a wonderful thing, it is not essential. However, a finding aid that shows how the collection is organized is a must. Ask a friend or family member to look at your papers and give you their opinion on how

useful your finding aid is. Let them read whatever instructions you have prepared and encourage them to use the materials themselves. Although you may be tempted to try to explain things to them, remember that once the materials are deposited in a library or other institution, you will not always be there to explain things to people using the materials.

- Do not just print out a cascading pedigree chart and ask to submit it. Many repositories would be flooded by such information. Narrative format is best, but even family group sheets will be easier to use and be more valuable than a cascading pedigree.
- Make arrangements to have the materials transported to the repository. Don't expect that repositories will be able to pick materials up from you.

Exploring manuscript collections can be a useful way of finding information that might otherwise be difficult to locate. Do not let the vast amount of original records available detract you from using them. You will often find records that exist nowhere else in the world, and if you happen to find a long-sought answer by researching manuscripts as a last resort, you may regret not having tried it sooner!

¹. Diary of Jesse Tilson, NEHGS Manuscript Collection Diaries/5/T/3A

². *The History of Kings County, Nova Scotia* - Brechin Collection, Spec. Col. 11/B/3

³. Gray, Benjamin G., *Account of Early Members of the family of Revd. B.G. Gray late of St. John N.B. deceased especially those in and around Massachusetts.*, MSS/C/1851

⁴. Saavedra, Dorothea M., "My Newfoundland Forebears: A Short Study of the Families Hissock & Manuel of Catalina, Newfoundland & The Families Wells & Whelan of Cupids, Newfoundland," MSS/C/1834.