

# Pownalborough Courthouse Collection at the Maine Historical Society

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The Pownalborough Courthouse Collection (#1924) at the Maine Historical Society in Portland, Maine, is a seldom used but solid genealogical resource. This particular collection is certainly not only unique, but one of the largest of its kind in Maine. Dedicated volunteers of the Lincoln County Cultural & Historical Association compiled a broad typescript summary of the contents, which provides detailed identification of the papers and folders in the collection. This project began in 1970, and was revised in 1990 and 2001. The 2001 update includes a summation that will enable interested genealogists researching eighteenth and nineteenth century ancestors in that area to make a rapid determination of the relevant folders in the collection. One can imagine the enormous difficulty of trying to navigate through eighty-six boxes of documents and sixteen boxes of charts, maps, and plans of larger items without this convenient catalog!

A background of the origin of the collection is in order. Major Samuel Goodwin (1716-1802) was one of the Plymouth Proprietors in the Kennebec Purchase, being agent and clerk of that company. His descendants were ship owners, shipmasters, farmers, businessmen, and local officials, whose records of legal matters and life events went through the Pownalborough Courthouse. So the collection concerns them as well as their family members, friends, relatives, and business associates.

The numerous papers, books, ledgers, and memorabilia of all sorts were stored in various trunks and boxes at the Pownalborough Courthouse until 1952, when the Alfred Canby family took possession of the collection. The arrangement of documents and papers, were initially filed by individual names, but over the years this arrangement became disturbed. Poor storage conditions led to the decision to move the collection. The Lincoln County Cultural and Historical Association at Wiscasset agreed to care for and accept responsibility for the collection from the Canby family in 1955. Professional advice was sought and the entire collection was placed in a third floor area that was safe and free of possible exposure to the elements. In 1998, by deed of gift from the Canby family [acting for the Goodwin-Johnson heirs], a transfer of the collection to the Maine Historical Society was completed.

Papers and documents in the collection should be of great interest to the Goodwin, Johnson, and Prescott-Canby families of that era. The Samuel Goodwin family was briefly treated in the *Maine Families in 1790* series [1] and mention of the collection and associated families is also found in the *NEHGR Register*. [2] But there is bound to be more information in this collection that will interest genealogists researching Dresden in the very early nineteenth century.

The Pilgrims came to the area to trade with the Indians for furs to send to England to pay their debts. Settlers from France and Germany came in mid-eighteenth century. The town of Pownalborough was incorporated in 1760, the same year that Lincoln County was established, and it became the county seat. The Court House built at Pownalborough was named after Thomas Pownal, the Royal Governor in Boston. The original town included all of the present towns of Wiscasset, Dresden, Alna, and Perkins or Swan Island. The town residents soon realized the need to divide the large town into precincts or parishes, and the east parish of Pownalborough (now Wiscasset) was created in 1773.

By 1794 the west parish towns of Dresden and New Milford (Alna) were set off. The courts were then transferred to the east parish, which in 1802 was named Wiscasset. Dresden became famous in the middle of the nineteenth century when ice from the Kennebec River was shipped all over the world.

The papers, maps, and published books and posters of the era remained in the Old Court House of Dresden for 200 years and have since been grouped into two broad categories, "Goodwin" and "Dresden." [3] The genealogies and names of the Pownalborough families are worthy of further mention: [4]

**Capt. Samuel Goodwin:** Included are family papers (1753-1916), accounts, daybooks, etc. [5] William Goodwin was the nephew of Major Samuel Goodwin, who resided in Charlestown by the ferry, and later in Boston. He collected fares for the ferry and tolls for the bridge, and owned lands on the upper Kennebec. He and his father were styled

“Chaise-Makers.”

1. William Goodwin took for his second wife Abigail Goodwin, daughter of Samuel. She was the widow of Capt. Thomas Johnson, who died in 1776. After the death of Goodwin, Abigail lived in Charlestown until 1839 when Thomas Johnson, administrator of her husband’s estate, had her come to live at Pownalborough where she died at age 93.
2. Caroline Louise Prescott (1829-1919), niece of Thomas Johnson, was married in 1855 to William J. Canby of Philadelphia. The Prescott-Canby papers are from 1801-1898.
3. Her sister, Sarah Augusta Prescott (1830-1914), was married to Capt. Samuel Randolph Goodwin in 1852 and went to sea with him on many voyages.
4. Capt. John Johnson (1741-1813), son-in-law of Major Goodwin, was an early postmaster at Pownalborough. Family papers of the Johnson family are from 1772-1901.
5. Thomas Johnson (1778-1850) was another early postmaster.
6. Martha Ann Johnson (1824-1891), the sister of Sarah, was married in 1848 to James F. B. Marshall. They lived in Hawaii and Washington.
7. Henry C. Pratt was a resident of Charlestown, but originally was from Orford, New Hampshire. He was a well-known portrait painter of the mid-nineteenth century. In 1831 he married Sarah Howard Johnson (1797-1882), who was daughter of John Johnson of Charlestown and niece of Thomas Johnson. Several of his portraits of members of the “Court House Family” hang in the court today.
8. James F. B. Marshall went to Hawaii in 1839 where he became a partner in the C. Brewer Company. While on a business trip back to Boston he married Martha Ann Johnson (1824-1891) who was daughter of John Johnson (see #6).
9. Jonathan Bowman was one of the initial justices in Lincoln County. He took as his second wife Ann Goodwin, who was granddaughter of Major Samuel Goodwin. Jonathan was born 1735 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and graduated from Harvard in 1755. He was a classmate of John Adams and others of that class who became prominent citizens. Judge Bowman was a heavy investor in lands and shipping, amassing a large estate over the years. He was politically astute and sided against the King in the years before 1776. Papers of the Bowman family are from 1761-1856.

### **Dresden:**

The files of Jonathan Bowman, judge of probate, were moved to the court from Bowman’s home after his death. They contain legal matters concerning civil disputes (1760-1795), such as line disagreements, lawsuits, and writs, as well as probate records, and original deeds.

The thirteen folders that comprise the “Town of Dresden Affairs” papers concern a multitude of subjects, most of which are commonly found in nineteenth-century town records. [6]

- Land transactions of the Plymouth Proprietors
- Fifty years of post office records, accounts, and correspondence (1806-1855)
- Church records from 1762 to 1960, which include records of meetings, lists of members, and related papers. The churches and organizations in these records include the primary church of that era, The First Parish Congregational Church (1821-1910), as well as the Methodist Society in Dresden (1811-1831), St. John’s Episcopal Church (1769-1848), the Universalist Society (1828-1960), and the Temperance Society (1833).
- Warrants and minutes of town meetings
- School records (1796-1852), of the Goodwin, Prescott, Lilly, Twycross, and Johnson families
- Bills, receipts, diaries, and daybooks, which show how the group of families managed their expenditures
- Account books describe how farms were managed, repairs made, and even the drinking habits of individuals.
- Clippings from newspapers were saved, as were entire issues. Ladies saved both culinary and medicinal recipes. Some wrote poetry. There are also artifacts in the collection, such as a baby bonnet of embroidered

white cotton, a needlepoint cover for a chair, and a pair of old fashioned spectacles in a metal case. [7]

- Folder twelve is titled “Vital Statistics between 1767-1843.” You may very well find an elusive vital record among the eighty-seven items in the folder. [8]
- Shipping papers in the collection concern the following vessels (Sch.= Schooner; Sl.= Sloop)< /FONT>

Sch. <i>Polly</i>	Brig <i>Polly</i>	Ship <i>Frances &amp; Mary</i>	Sl. <i>King George</i>
Sl. <i>Charming Molly</i>	Sch. <i>Tobago Bucket</i>	Sl. <i>Two Sisters</i>	Brig <i>Minerva</i>
Sch. <i>Swan</i>	Ship <i>Ploughboy</i>	Brig <i>Venus</i>	Sl. <i>Maria</i>
Sch. <i>John</i>	Brig <i>William</i>	Sch. <i>William</i>	Brig <i>William Henry</i>
Sch. <i>Lydia &amp; Mary</i>	Ship <i>Rockaway</i>	Ship <i>Calliope</i>	Ship <i>St. James</i>
Ship <i>Cuba</i>	Ship <i>Mayflower</i>		

Other valuable resources in the collection include:

- 214 deeds from 1662 to 1832
- 45 wills and estate inventories from 1788 to 1850)
- 57 powers of attorney
- 27 depositions
- 111 obligations
- 856 writs from 1761 to 1830

One box of the collection holds 139 documents dealing with town and state politics. Another contains printed materials such as advertising, flyers, almanacs etc., from 1802-1885. [9] Also included in this box are selected issues of periodicals such as *Zodiac*, *Young People’s Mirror*, *Mechanics Magazine*, *Ladies Magazine*, *American Repertory*, etc.

Names of individuals or places that are found in the collections at the Maine Historical Society (MHS) are typically placed onto 3x5 index cards for cross-reference purposes and rapid identification. Researchers are encouraged to phone or write to determine if a collection exists for any individuals or towns in either the Pownalborough collection or others.

The Pownalborough Courthouse Collection is loaded with useful information about our ancestors and is accessible to all visitors of the MHS. Librarians will assist researchers by bringing boxes or folders to the reading area and provide patrons with gloves, which must be worn for preservation reasons.

Researchers will become mesmerized as they plow into this wonderful collection, which is bound to yield many nuggets of information not heretofore known. To learn more, contact:

Maine Historical Society  
485 Congress St  
Portland, Maine 04101  
Tel: 207-774-1822  
<http://www.mainehistory.org/>

[1] Ruth Gray, Alice MacDonald Long, and Joseph Crook Anderson II, C.G., F.A.S.G., *Maine Families in 1790* series (Camden, Maine: Picton Press), vol 2:145, 6:333, and 7:183-186.

[2] NEHGR 67[1913]:27-32.

[3] MHS Coll 1924, Summary Guide to the Pownalborough Courthouse Collection, Lena E Browne, compiler, (Lincoln County Cultural & Historical Assn., Wiscasset, Maine, 1970, 1990, revised 2001).

[4] NEHGR 67[1913]:27-32; Ruth Gray, Alice MacDonald Long, and Joseph Crook Anderson II, C.G., F.A.S.G., *Maine Families in 1790* series (Camden, Maine: Picton Press), vol 2:145, 6:333, and 7:183-186.

[5] Ibid.

[6] MHS Coll #1924, Document Box III-14 "Town of Dresden Affairs," 1761-1878.

[7] MHS Coll #1924, Document Box IV-6, "Artifacts."

[8] MHS Coll #1924, Document Box III-14, "Town of Dresden Affairs," 1761-1878, folder 12, "Vital Statistics."

[9] MHS coll 1924, Box IV-7 "Miscellaneous Printed Materials, Invitations (handwritten) 1791-1879.