Charles Phelps (1717-1789)  
Papers, 1764-1928 (Bulk: 1764-1889)  
MS 31

Introduction

This collection consists of papers documenting several generations of the family of Charles Phelps (1717-1789), an early settler of Marlboro, Vermont, and a participant in the conflict between New York and Vermont over the ownership of the New Hampshire Grants. The collection is stored in one archival flip top box and consumes .5 linear feet of shelf space.

The collection is the result of two separate accessions. The first half (folders 1-11) includes loose papers purchased from Goodspeed’s in Boston in July 1948. A related scrapbook also purchased from Goodspeed’s is cataloged separately (at MS 974.3 P513). The second half (folders 12-28) was the gift of Charles A. Pierce of Springfield, Massachusetts, through Vermont Historical Society board member Harold Goddard Rugg in 1941. These papers were originally from the library of James Houghton Phelps of Townshend, Vermont.

Biographical Note

Charles Phelps (1717-1789)

Charles Phelps was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, in August 1717. As a youth, he worked as a bricklayer and mason in Northampton and Hadley, Massachusetts, before becoming a lawyer in the early 1750s and serving as a selectman and justice of the peace in Hadley and Hampshire County by the later 1750s. Charles Phelps was first married to Dorothy Root (1740-1777); after her death, he remarried to Anstis Kneeland in 1778. He was a strong supporter of the American Revolution. He moved his family to New Marlborough (in what is now Vermont) in 1764 and died there on 17 April 1789.

Charles Phelps was involved in speculating in the areas that would eventually become Vermont as well as in the controversy over ownership of the New Hampshire Grants. Although he initially accepted New York’s claim to this land, he later argued that Massachusetts annex the area that is now mostly Windham County in Vermont. Following the creation of an independent Vermont in 1777, he again resumed his earlier support of New York's claims. He was strongly opposed Vermont's independence and to recognition of Vermont by Congress, repeatedly referring to it as the “pretended state of Vermont.” He viewed Ethan and Ira Allen as enemies of free people and one of his ideas was to have New York cede land on the western edge of New York as a haven for his supporters. His vocal opposition to Vermont’s land claims caused him to be jailed by that state and his property confiscated (including his library which claimed to be the largest in Vermont) in 1784. He was able to recover some of his property and the ability to practice law by taking an oath of allegiance to Vermont, also in 1784. However, his
last will still recorded his location “at New Marlborough, in the county of Cumberland, state of New York.”

Timothy Phelps (1747-1819) and Charles Phelps (1743-1814)

Charles Phelps’ sons Charles (1743-1814) and Timothy (1747-1819) were also active supporters of their father’s position in the question of the New Hampshire Grants and Vermont’s boundaries. A Harvard graduate, Charles Phelps (1743-1814) of Hadley, Massachusetts, studied law and received his commission from Governor Tryon of New York in 1771. He offered some assistance to his father and brothers in their opposition to Vermont’s land claims. His brother, Timothy Phelps, was appointed by the governor of New York as agent of minute men and subsequently banished from Vermont. He returned to Vermont around 1782 and was jailed for several months before agreeing to take an oath of allegiance to the state of Vermont. He died at Marlboro, Vermont, in 1817.

Charles Phelps (1781-1854)

Charles Phelps (1781-1854) was the son of Timothy Phelps (1747-1819), grandson of Charles Phelps (1717-1789), and a resident of Townshend, Vermont. He was admitted to bar of Windham County, Vermont, and served as a probate judge and member of the Vermont Council, before moving to Cincinnati in 1854. He died in Cincinnati on 19 November 1854. Charles Phelps married Eliza Houghton in 1814.

James Houghton Phelps (1817-1893)

James Houghton Phelps was born, the son of Eliza Houghton and Charles Phelps (1781-1854), in West Townshend, Vermont on 6 September 1817; he was the great-grandson of Charles Phelps (1717-1789). He graduated from Middlebury College in 1835, went on to serve as a lawyer, county judge and Vermont state representative and senator. He died in Suffield, Connecticut, on 16 September 1893.

Scope and Content Note

Items purchased from Goodspeed’s in 1948

This collection consists of two distinct parts from two separate accessions. The first part (folders 1-11) includes loose papers purchased from Goodspeed’s in Boston in July 1948. These papers focus primarily on Charles Phelps’ (1717-1789) participation in the conflict between New York and Vermont over political control of what is now southwest Vermont. This part of the collection documents Phelps’ communications and visits to both Governor Clinton of New York and to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in order to seek protection from the “pretended state of Vermont” and ask for possible annexation of the area. A smaller selection of documents from this part of the collection pertains to a later period in the family history occupied by Charles Phelps (1781-1854) and Townshend, Vermont (folders 8 and 9). A map of lots for the town of Marlboro and a
plan of Johnson’s Gore (incorporated as Acton in 1800 and annexed to Townshend in 1840) are also included in folder 10 of this part of the collection.

A related scrapbook also purchased from Godspeed’s is cataloged separately (see related materials section below for more information).

A “Checklist of Charles Phelps Collection purchased from Goodspeed 1948” is located in folder 0 and provides a separate inventory of the individual documents forming this part of the collection, each with a sequential number that was assigned when the collection was unpacked. The inventory section below includes numbers that refer to the 1948 checklist in parentheses below each file listing.

Gift of Charles A. Pierce in 1941

The second part of the collection (folders 12-28) was the result of a separate gift to the Vermont Historical Society and contains papers that were originally from the library of James Houghton Phelps (1817-1893) of Townshend, Vermont. A sizable portion of the collection (folders 14-21) is family correspondence, 1849-1854, during which time several family members appear to have moved westward and settled in Cincinatti, Ohio. Among others, letters are written to and/or from James Houghton Phelps’ mother, Eliza Houghton Phelps, as well as the families of his sisters, Eliza Phelps Cook, Jane Phelps Atwater, and Frances “Fanny” Phelps Taft.

Other papers from this part of the collection include deeds, proprietor’s records and other documents pertaining to both James Houghton Phelps and his father, Charles Phelps (1781-1854), as well as to Townshend, Newbury, Marlboro, and Johnson’s Gore (or Acton), Vermont.

Related Materials

A related scrapbook, probably compiled by James H. Phelps, is cataloged separately (at * folio MS 974.3 P513) and consists of manuscripts, clippings, and other ephemera documenting the Phelps family over four generations. Manuscripts included from the 1760s and 1770s predominantly relate to Charles Phelps’ (1717-1789) opposition to an independent State of Vermont. His son, Timothy (1747 - 1819) also appears in some of this early material while his grandson Charles Phelps (1781-1854) accounts for much of the scrapbook's later contents related to the family and his law practice in Windham County and Townshend, Vermont. Material documenting Townshend, Vermont, includes some treasurer's reports.

A second related scrapbook, also compiled by James H. Phelps, is located at XMSC 19.13. It contains newspapers clippings that reprinted early documents from Vermont’s founding.
Inventory

I. Purchased from Goodspeed’s, 1948 (numbers in parentheses refer to 1948 inventory)

MS 31:01 Petition [to Massachusetts legislature] for lands west of New York, 1778
   (48, 49, 50, 51, 56)
2 Complaints for loss of property by Charles Phelps and Amariah Park, 1782
   (34, 35, 36, 37)
3 “Vermont taking away liberties.” Includes a resolution describing the State of Vermont as treasonable (possibly by Timothy Phelps) and an address to Governor William Tryon.
   (53, 59)
4 Finances, 1774-1786. Includes promissory notes, bonds, and accounts of travel expenses for trips to Poughkeepsie and Boston as well as Charles Phelps’ true copy of an act by the State of Vermont regarding religious rights dated 10 December 1784 (an earlier note, dated 8 November 1784, regarding accounts settled by Phelps with a Mr. Whipple is on the back of this copy).
   (40, 44, 45, 46, 47, 60)
5 Regarding appeals to New York for protection from Vermont, 1773-1774 and undated. Includes documentation related to expenses incurred from trips to argue his case (also see folder 4) and incomplete draft [?] to Governor William Tryon, possibly by Timothy Phelps (also see folder 3).
   (52, 54, 55, 57, 58)
6 Receipts and other financial matters, 1765-1773 (also see folder 4)
   (17, 39, 41, 42, 43, 61)
7 Miscellaneous papers, 1770-1840, 1885. Includes items related to Windham County, Middlebury College, and Norwich University
   (4, 9, 13, 20, 28, 66, 71, 78, 96)
8 Charles Phelps (1781-1854) legal and military papers, 1804-1836
   (5, 12, 15, 16, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 31, 32, 32A, 33, 33A, 65, 68, 73, 91)
9 Townshend (Vt.) documents, 1799-1830, 1863, and 1884. Includes treasurer’s report by Charles Phelps (1781-1854) for 1826-1829.
   (3, 6, 10, 11, 14, 27, 30, 69, 74)
10 Manuscript maps. Includes a map of lots for the town of Marlborough; a plan of Johnson’s Gore (incorporated as Acton in 1800, annexed to Townshend in 1840) by Amos Haile; and a map of lands along the Connecticut River, titled “Canada to Roxbury.”
   (62, 63, 64)
11 Newspaper clippings, 1806, 1823, 1876.
II. Gift of Charles A. Pierce, 1941.

12 Deeds, etc., mostly Jacob Bayley of Newbury (Vt.), 1770s-1840s
13 _____, Charles Phelps (New Marlborough and Draper, Cumberland County, New York), 1764-1777
14 Letters, Park F. and C.H. Cook to Thomas Cook, 1850-1854
15 _____, Eliza Phelps Cook to Thomas Cook (her husband), 1852
16 _____, Jane Phelps Atwater to Eliza Phelps Cook, 1852-1854
17 _____, Charles Phelps (1781-1854) to Thomas and Eliza Cook, 1851-1854
18 _____, Eliza Houghton Phelps to her children 1852-1854
19 _____, John Wolcott Phelps to James Houghton Phelps, 1849-1851
20 _____, Alphonso Taft to Thomas Cook, 1852-1853, and to James, 1888-1889
21 _____, Miscellaneous, 1850-1854
22 Papers, Charles Phelps (1781-1854), 1800-1853
23 _____, James Houghton Phelps, 1840, 1857, 1888-1889
24 _____, Miscellaneous, 1741-1850s. Includes Proprietor’s records for Johnson’s Gore, 1782-1840
25 Village Society in West Townshend, 1848 (James Houghton Phelps)
26 Wantastiguet Trout Club, 1924-1928
27 Transcribed documents relating to the Ticonderoga campaign, 1777 (handwritten copies)
28 Transcribed documents relating to the formation of the state of Vermont (handwritten copies)

Ethan Bisbee & Gail Wiese
August 2014
rev. March 2016
rev. September 2016