

Thomas H. Johnson (1902-1985)
Papers, 1916-1933, 1944
MSA 441

Introduction

This collection consists of some of the papers of Thomas H. Johnson of Bradford, Vermont, who participated in the Floating University as a teacher in 1926-27. The collection also documents Johnson's early teaching career in Readsboro, Vermont. The collection was given to the Vermont Historical Society by his daughter, Laura Johnson Waterman, of Corinth, Vermont, in 2006 (ms. acc. no. 2006.14), with an additional two items from 1916 and 1921 given in November 2016. It is shelved in one flip top archival box and consumes of .5 linear feet of shelf space.

Biographical Note

Thomas Herbert Johnson (1902-1985) was born in Bradford, Vermont, the son of Herbert Thomas Johnson (1872-1942) and Myra Burbeck Johnson. Myra Burbeck came from Danvers, Massachusetts. Herbert, the son of Thomas and Harriet (Avery) Johnson, also of Bradford, Vermont, had served in the Vermont National Guard during the Spanish-American War and was Vermont's Adjutant-General from 1917 to 1941. The Vermont National Guard's headquarters in Colchester, Vermont, Camp Johnson, is named for him. His father, Thomas, was the son of Captain Haynes Johnson of Newbury, Vermont.

Thomas H. Johnson married Catherine Schyler Rice of New York on September 11, 1934, and they had two children, Thomas and Laura. Thomas had a sister, Ruth, married to Francis P. Tompkins, and a brother, Edward C., who died at age twenty-four.

Thomas briefly attended Dartmouth, and after a year of teaching, started over again at Williams College, class of 1926. He earned his PhD. from Harvard in 1934. He taught at Rutgers, Harvard, NYU, University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, and Williams. He joined the faculty of the Lawrenceville School in 1937, serving as chairman of the English Department there from 1944 until he retired in 1967. He was the author of *The Oxford Companion to American History*, is credited with discovering the Puritan poet Edward Taylor (1664?-1729), co-edited the *Literary History of the United States* (1948, 3 vols.), and was the editor of six volumes of Emily Dickinson's poetry and letters. His last work was *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography*, published in 1955. Thomas H. Johnson died January 3, 1985.

Scope & Content

The focus of this collection is the time that Thomas H. Johnson spent with the Floating University, 1926-1927, where he served as a teacher of English. This experiment in global understanding and education involved roughly fifty faculty members, four hundred and fifty students, the Holland-American ship *S.S. Ryndam*, and a

trip of eight months, forty-seven ports, and fifty thousand miles of travel by ship and land. Johnson wrote very detailed and thoughtful letters home to his parents in Montpelier, Vermont, describing what he saw. Some of the letters described his teaching efforts, but mostly they described the lands he saw and the people he met. Ex-governor Henry Allen of Kansas was on board as dean of the school of journalism, and he had the clout to open many doors for the group. One of the interesting additions to the collection is a letter from Joseph Grew, post-war ambassador to Japan, reacting in 1944 to a 1926 letter Thomas had sent him, and saying how well Thomas had captured the spirit of the Japanese in the 1920s.

The collection also includes two diaries, one of four months duration, when Thomas was fourteen, speaking mostly of the reading he was doing, life at school, and farm life. The other is a 1921-1922 diary, when he was teaching in the Readsboro, Vermont, schools for a few months, and ending when he was teaching in the Boston area. This diary makes interesting reading, filled with lots of self-examination, his hopes and fears for his future, his reaction to teaching in a small rural school and wonderful descriptions of some of his students, and ending with his arrival at Williams College and his being turned down for a fraternity.

There are some interesting letters included. In one letter Thomas asks to be reinstated at Dartmouth College, where he had been asked to leave, and President Hopkins tells him why that would not be a good idea. The collection also includes letters from Harvard's Bliss Perry and George Kittridge and a long letter to his Uncle Charles critiquing the paper/magazine *The Interpreter*.

The collection also includes a notebook containing a description of Johnson's first day on the job teaching school in Readsboro, Vermont, on August 21, 1921. The description is well written, hinting of his past as a resident of the cosmopolitan city of Montpelier and his future profession as an English teacher. For example, he writes, "Every person I have seen so far is a bit different. Mr. Howe talks – about everybody – everything. He lives next to the Hotel in a little house (all the houses are little) with four women – one of them crazy. So he says."

Related Collections

Thomas H. Johnson's letters written to his future wife, Catherine Rice, in 1933-34 as he was finishing his doctorate and looking for a job are at the Vermont Historical Society's Leahy Library, MSA 780.

The author's scholarly papers are principally at Princeton University (C0468). There may be collections of other papers at other repositories. The Vermont Historical Society Library holds the papers of Thomas H. Johnson's Revolutionary War era ancestors in the Johnson Family of Newbury, Vermont, Papers, 1775-1886 (Doc 574).

Two photographs of Thomas H. Johnson as a young child and two additional photographs of the family are in the VHS's picture files under F-PO-Johnson. Seven

photographs of the Johnson family farm in Bradford, known as Stonecliff Farm, are in F-TO-Bradford.

Inventory

- MSA 441:1 1916 diary, "Books I have read in 1916" notebook, and contemporary photograph of Thomas.
- 2 Correspondence with Dartmouth College
- 3 1921-1922 diary and letter; diary with impressions of Readsboro written on first day of school, August 21, 1921, and jottings about books and music
- 4 Floating University, letters, 1926, 1944
- 5 _____, _____, 1927
- 6 _____, photographs
- 7 _____, *New York Times* coverage
- 8 Miscellaneous letters, 1925-1933
- 9 Envelopes

Ethan W. Bisbee
July 2007
Rev. December 1, 2016
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