



# Newport Historical Society

## Guide to the The Obadiah Williams Collection, 1743 – 1859

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### Descriptive Summary

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <i>Collection Identifier</i> | MS.91.57.1  |
| <i>Title</i>                 | The Obadiah Williams Collection   |
| <i>Creator</i>               | Williams, Obediah   |
| <i>Date</i>                  | 1743 – 1859   |
| <i>Extent</i>                | approximately 245 letters   |
| <i>Abstract</i>              | Correspondence and related documents of two generations of the family of Obadiah Williams (1767-1848), Quakers, of Newport and Providence, R.I., New Bedford, Mass., and New York State, chiefly reflecting family matters; connections with the Rotch and Rodman families, whalers and merchants from New Bedford and the Brown family, of Providence, famous for their stand against slavery and founders of Providence Boarding School and Brown University; and the changes, principally those in the first half of the 19th century, involved in the history of the U.S. Subjects include the capture by the British of a ship mastered by Nicholas Williams in 1807, which led to financial disagreements with his brother, David Williams, a clockmaker in Newport; and the War of 1812, particularly pertaining to the death of James Hadwin, a relative, the |

capture of a family ship by a British privateer, and the embargo in Newport and subsequent difficulties experienced by Quaker merchants which led to the move of Obadiah Williams, merchant, farmer, and businessman, and other family members to Bridgewater and other farming towns in New York State, and Ohio.

Other subjects include the utilization of ties in Newport by family members in New York to conduct trade via the Erie Canal; lands owned in New York State, Ohio, and Massachusetts; political and religious revivalism in New York in the 1820s, including family criticism of the Hicksite movement; the support of Obadiah's son, Henry Williams, of the Whig Party and Martin Van Buren; Quaker women, as exemplified by Ruth Hadwin Williams, second wife of Obadiah and their daughter, Catharine (Williams) Carman, an early student at Providence Boarding School; and descriptions of Newport (ca. 1848), as seen through the eyes of Henry Williams, a visitor, reflecting its people, events, and attitudes. Other family members represented include Dorcas Hadwin Brown, Obadiah Brown, and Mary Rotch.

## Historical Note

The Williams Collection tells the story of a common Quaker family, whose patriarch was Obadiah Williams. Williams was a saddle maker transplanted to Newport from New Bedford at the time of the Revolution. Because of the close familial ties characteristic of 18th century Quakers, the Williamses and the Robinsons shared many common relatives, including Rotches and Rodmans from New Bedford. Through his second marriage, Obadiah became linked with the Brown and Almy families of Providence. Obadiah's brothers included David, a respected Newport clock maker, and Nicholas, a would-be merchant who suffered greatly from Newport's post-Revolution economic depression and from the restrictions on trade in the years leading to the War of 1812. Late in 1812, with the threat of an attack looming over Newport, Obadiah transplanted his family to the farmlands of New York, where they fought to maintain their conception of the Quaker faith amidst the schisms that occurred in the Society of Friends during the 1830s and 1840s.

## Scope and Content

The Williams Collection is comprised of 245 letters detailing the private and professional lives of members of this widely spread family, and illuminates their response to the stresses of life during America's early national period.

Within the family's correspondence, combined with the social and religious norms of the Society of Friends, to which each addressor and addressee almost invariably belonged, a unique pattern of Quaker kinship is revealed. Bound together by centralized meeting locations and marriage restrictions, the Williams maintained strong connections and correspondence with relations that would seem distant to modern sensibilities. Among these relations were the Rotches and Rodmans, who were whalers and merchants from New Bedford, and the Browns of Providence, famous for their stand against slavery and as the founders of the Providence Boarding School and Brown University. Quaker kinship provided the Williams with a source of identity, and a means of surviving the turmoil of embargo, war, migration and economic upheaval.

Another major theme evident within these letters is that of change. The half-century involved, 1800 - 1850, was perhaps the period of greatest change in the history of the United States. Great debates were waged over foreign affairs, economics, the virtue of our citizens, and the very path our government and nation would follow. To a great extent the Williams family reflected and interacted with this period of transition.

As the United States struggled to obtain international respectability, first through embargo and later through war with Great Britain, the Williams found themselves unwilling and unfortunate participants

in this struggle. Nicholas Williams and his ship were captured by the British in 1807, furthering financial ruin initiated by the loss of a ship off the coast of Africa. Nicholas was forced to turn to his brother David, a Newport clockmaker, for assistance as he moved his family first to Baltimore then to New York. Letters between the brothers exhibit the tensions created over payment of this debt, tensions which would lead to a rending of Nicholas' and David's relationship. Around 1811 correspondence between the two abruptly ceased.

The War of 1812 led to further upheavals in the Williams' and also the Quaker way of life in Newport. Samuel Williams and his ship were captured by a British privateer and taken to Halifax; James Hadwin, a member of the Williams family through marriage, was injured aboard a gunboat and later died. The embargo and the war struck at the heart of the commercial nature of Newport causing hardship and fear, furthering a process begun during the Revolution. Prominent Quaker merchants were driven from Newport during the Revolution by the difficulty of conducting business and because of their suspected loyalism. They fled, taking much of Newport's business capital with them. This process was completed by the War of 1812. The Newport meeting, once the largest in the country, had been reduced to less than twenty members. For Quakers the economic and religious vitality of Newport had vanished.

Many of the Quakers that fled moved to the fertile lands of New York and Ohio. They wrote letter after letter to their brethren in Newport describing the commercial and agricultural possibilities of the western lands. Writers from different locales competed to attract new settlers to their communities. As a result the western lands were often described in near utopian terms. They were the proverbial land of milk and honey and a place to escape the threat of bombardment and economic downturns. Descriptions of the hardships to be encountered were rare and usually qualified.

Driven by the stick of embargo and war and enticed by the carrot of prosperity in the western lands, Obadiah Williams, the brother of Nicholas and David and the father of Samuel, uprooted his family, leaving the life of the city and commerce for the life of frontier and farm. Obadiah and his family joined a flood of settlers seeking a better way of life in New York. They carried with them Quaker traditions and settled in farming communities occupied by their Quaker friends and relatives. They maintained ties with Newport and Providence and utilized these connections in conducting trade. Obadiah eventually established his family about ten miles from the Erie Canal and was thus able to ship his saddles and crops throughout New England, joining in the increasingly commercial nature of the country. As the years passed and Obadiah's younger children reached maturity they joined in what one historian called "the centrifuge of marriage." As they married and had children they spun out from the settlement of their father to seek prosperity of their own. Economic and social ties were thus extended further.

The 1820's and 1830's were decades of intense political and religious upheaval in New York. The Williams letters provide commentary and elaboration on these events. Religious revivalism in New York was so intense during this period that one historian dubbed central and western New York the "Burned-Over District." The role of Quakers in this district, within which many of the Williams lived, warrants further investigation. A preliminary study of this collection suggests that the Williams family was concerned primarily with maintaining the integrity of their own orthodox Quaker faith against threats of schism. Many of the letters are concerned with criticizing heretics, especially the Hicksite

wing of the faith. This concern with self-preservation placed the Williams on the periphery of the revivalism of the Burned-Over District, which was primarily a non-sectarian movement. Nevertheless, a limited number of the letters explore the mood of the Burned-Over district from a Quaker perspective, providing a different view of this phenomenon. The Williams also add their voices to some of the concerns of the revivalists, such as abolition and temperance.

Other portions of the collection provide commentary on the political aspects of the period. The letters tell a tale of strong and sometimes bitter opposition to the War of 1812. The lack of political commentary in the letters throughout the late 1810's and early 1820's is reflective of the placidity of the "Era of Good Feelings" and of the Williams' concern with their own survival in a new land. The advent of the Jacksonian style of politics, and perhaps a more comfortable lifestyle, induced Henry Williams, the son of Obadiah, to provide his perspective on the "Loco-Focos" and the election of 1840, in which Henry was a staunch supporter of the Whig party and "Old Tip" - William Henry Harrison, against the Democratic candidate Martin Van Buren - the "Magician."

For students of family and women's history this collection is rich with information. The fact that the Williams family remained close-knit and achieved success in this period of political, religious, and social upheaval is mainly a testament to the determination and efficiency of Ruth Hadwen Williams, Obadiah's second wife. Assuming the responsibility of caring for seven children from Obadiah's first marriage was no easy task in itself. Compounded by relocation to the frontier and the birth of four children of her own, the task would seem insurmountable. Her letters are filled with some of the day to day drudgery of her role within the family, yet they are also filled with thoughts of love for all her children. Upon her death those children remembered her with fond reverence. The mantle of responsibility was passed to her daughter Catharine. One of the first women to receive an education at Moses Brown's Providence Boarding School, she later assumed care of a retarded sibling and an elderly brother-in-law, whom she later married. Taken as a whole, this collection tells a unique tale of Quaker motherhood and womanhood.

For students of Newport history the collection is invaluable. Around 1848 Henry Williams made a visit to the place of his birth. He wrote a long narrative letter to his sister Catharine describing the people, places, and attitudes in late 1840's Newport. Many other letters to the New York branch of the family were intended to inform them of goings on in Newport, and thus provide researchers with contemporary views of the town. Students of economics will be interested to read detailed descriptions of wartime price fluctuations and in later prices of goods and land. Social and medical historians will find detailed descriptions of sicknesses and treatments, and commentary on contemporary attitudes toward birth and death. Lastly, genealogists can study an extensive list of names as an aid to determining lineage.

## Organization

This collection is arranged in two series chronologically. Undated material appears at the end of series 1 although approximate dates have been provided where possible. Items that have approximate dates are

presented as undated material so as not to mislead researchers, but still provide possibly valuable data.

1. Correspondence
2. Papers

## Subject Access

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| <i>People</i> | Brown, Dorcas Hadwin<br>Brown, Obadiah M., 1771-1822<br>Rotch, Mary, 1777-1848<br>Rotch, Thomas, 1792-1840<br>Williams, Obediah |
|---------------|---|

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|-----------------|--|
| <i>Subjects</i> | Land grants--New York (State)<br>Society of Friends--History |
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| <i>Form/Genre</i> | correspondence<br>Quaker<br>merchants<br>farmers (people in agriculture) |
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## Access and Use

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| <i>Physical Access</i> | This collection is housed on site at the Newport Historical Society.<br>Researchers can be seen by appointment during operating hours. |
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| <i>Citation</i> | The Obadiah Williams Collection, MS.91.57.1, Newport Historical Society, Newport, Rhode Island |
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## Administrative Information

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| <i>Processor</i>         | Processed by Stacie Parillo, 2013.   |
| <i>Descriptive Rules</i> | Finding aid based on <i>Describing Archives: A Content Standard</i> (DACS)   |
| <i>Accession Info</i>    | The Williams Collection was donated to the Newport Historical Society by Marion Hoffmire in July 1991, and was added to over time. |
|                          | Accession Number: 91.57  |

## Inventory

Series 02: Papers, circa 1790