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William Putnam Papers

1840-1886

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For several decades in the mid-nineteenth century, William Putnam (1792-1877) and his family operated a general store in Wendell Depot, Massachusetts, situated strategically between the canal and the highway leading to Warwick. Serving an area that remains rural to the present day, Putnam dealt in a range of essential merchandise, trading in lumber and shingles, palm leaf, molasses and sugar, tea, tobacco, quills, dishes, cloth and ribbon, dried fish, crackers, and candy. At various times, he was authorized by the town Selectmen to sell "intoxicating liquors" (brandy, whiskey, and rum) for "Medicinal, chemical and mechanical purposes only," and for a period, he served as postmaster for Wendell Depot.

The daybooks and correspondence of William Putnam record the daily transactions of an antebellum storekeeper in rural Wendell, Massachusetts. Offering a dense record of transactions from 1840-1847, the daybooks provide a chronological accounting of all sales and credits in the store, including barter with local residents of the community and with contractors for the new Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad. The last in the series of daybooks lists a surprisingly high percentage of Wendell's residents (by name, in alphabetical order) who owed him money as of October 1846. The correspondence associated with the collection continues into the 1880s and provides relatively slender documentation of Putnam's litigiousness, his financial difficulties after the Civil War, and the efforts of his son John William to continue the business.

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Background on William Putnam

For several decades in the mid-nineteenth century, William Putnam (1792-1877) and his family operated a general store in Wendell Depot, situated strategically between the canal and the highway leading to Warwick. Born in nearby New Salem on July 7, 1792, the elder of two sons of Samuel and Hephsebah (Pierce) Putnam, Putnam married Julia Whiting Holden (1796-1881) in about 1814, raising a family of ten, including Danforth (1815-1900), William (b.1816), Frederick (1819-1894), Saul (b. 1820), Abraham Pierce (1822-1903), Stillman Holden (1825-1916), Nathan Bond (1827-1907), John William (1829-1881), Edwin (b.1831), and Mary (b. ca.1833).

Located in an area that remains rural to the present day, Putnam dealt in a range of essential merchandise, trading in lumber and shingles, palm leaf, molasses and sugar, tea, tobacco, quills, dishes, cloth and ribbon, dried fish, crackers, candy, and an array of dry goods. At various times, he was authorized by the town Selectmen to sell "intoxicating liquors" (brandy, whiskey, and rum) for "Medicinal, chemical and mechanical purposes only," and for a period, he served as the postmaster for Wendell Depot. Many local residents paid off their debts in barter, with many women trading palm leaf hats at ten cents each.

Ownership of the Putnam store eventually passed to William's sons (probably Danforth), and it appears to have been sold out of the family at some time before 1875.

Scope of collection

The daybooks and correspondence of William Putnam record the daily transactions of an antebellum storekeeper in rural Wendell, Massachusetts. Offering a dense record of transactions from 1840-1847, the daybooks provide a chronological accounting of all sales and credits in the store, including barter with local residents of the community and with contractors for the new Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad. The last in the series of daybooks lists a surprisingly high percentage of Wendell's residents (by name, in alphabetical order) who owed him money as of October 1846. The correspondence associated with the collection continues into the 1880s and provides relatively slender documentation of Putnam's litigiousness, his financial difficulties after the Civil War, and the efforts of his son John William to continue the business. Significant entries include Joseph Leland, Prentice and Brown, Charles Parmenter, and the Wendell Mill Co.

The daybooks occasionally contain other information, including work records for Putnam's employees (among which were his sons) and other financial transactions, and two documents stand out for local interest. A memo from the town Selectmen, Feb. 3, 1858, appoints Putnam "agent of said Town of Wendell, and authorize him to purchase intoxicating liquors to be used in the arts of for Medicinal, chemical and mechanical purposes only, and to sell the same for such purposes, and for no others." Considering the litigation in which he was involved, it seems unlikely that Putnam remained faithful to the letter of his agreement. Probably unrelated, the collection includes an undated (ca.1840s) three page document titled "Friendly suggestions for the consideration of the School Committee" regarding student attendance, admissions standards, and the curriculum.

Inventory

Putnam, William: Daybooks, Wendell, Mass.

1840-1848

Receipts and papers removed from daybooks

1842-1848

Box 1: 1

Putnam, William: Daybook, Wendell, Mass.

1840-1843

Box 1: 2

Putnam, William: Daybook, Wendell, Mass.

1841 Sept.-1842 Jan.

Box 1: 3

Putnam, William: Daybook, Wendell, Mass.

1843 Dec.-1844 July

Box 1: 4

Putnam, William: Daybook, Wendell, Mass.

1844 Sept.-1845 March

Box 1: 5

Putnam, William: Daybook, Wendell, Mass.

1845 Sept.-1846 June

Box 1: 6

Putnam, William: Daybook, Wendell, Mass.

1846 Oct.-1847 July

Box 1: 7

Putnam, William: Correspondence and agreements

1840-1886

Putnam, William: Correspondence and agreements

1840-1845

Box 1: 8

Putnam, William: Correspondence and agreements

1856-1860

Box 1: 9

Putnam, William: Correspondence and agreements

1861-1865

Box 1: 10

Putnam, William: Correspondence and agreements

1866-1886

Box 1: 11

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from: Donald W. Howe, 1957; Robert Lucas, 1987 (correspondence); and Dan Casavant, 2001 (daybook, 1843-1844).

Processing Information

Processed by Ruth Owen Jones, October 1985, and Dex Haven, August 2010.

Language:

English

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Copyright and Use (More information)

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Search terms

Subjects

Barter--Massachusetts--Wendell.
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Consumers--Massachusetts--Wendell.
General stores--Massachusetts--Wendell.
Liquor stores--Massachusetts--Wendell.
Panama hat industry--Massachusetts--Wendell.
Schools--Massachusetts--Wendell.
Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad.
Wendell (Mass.)--Economic conditions--19th century.
Wendell (Mass.)--History--19th century.

Contributors

Putnam, William [main entry]

Genres and formats

Daybooks.

Link to similar SCUA collections

Massachusetts (West)

Mercantile



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