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John Wright Ledgers

1818-1859

9 volumes (3 linear ft.)

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Descendants of one of the founding families of Northampton, Mass., John Wright and his brother Samuel were farmers and freight haulers during the first half of the nineteenth century. Before the 1840s, the brothers hauled freight by wagon from Northampton as far away as Hartford and Boston, however the advent of lower-cost carriers over canal and rail, led them to restrict their operations to a local clientele.

The Wright collection includes nine bound volumes and four folders of loose material associated with the businesses of John Wright, his brother Samuel, and son Edwin. They document the growth of a freight hauling firm that supported a substantial trade stretching to Boston, as well as the eventual decline of that business.

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Background on John and Samuel Wright

The brothers John and Samuel Wright were seventh generation descendants of Samuel Wright, one of the first English settlers of Northampton, Massachusetts. After the John Pynchon financed the purchase of land on the west side of the Connecticut River valley, the first Samuel removed from Springfield to Norwottuck, the settlement that would become Northampton in 1655 or 1656. A farmer who hired out as a laborer or teamster, Samuel Wright appears in Pynchon's account books for "carrying from my house to the foot of the falls 44 bushels of wheate...[,] 1 day at the mill...[,] Reaping and carrying Indian [Corne]."1

The seventh generation John (b. ca.1782) and Samuel (b. ca.1788) did not stray far from the original Samuel, by either geography or occupation. Still largely an agricultural community in the years after the American Revolution, Northampton was connected by a strong network of trade and kinship between area households.2 The Wrights listed themselves as farmers in censuses throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, yet farming in this New England family-based economy was never the sole occupation: farming implied a cooperative effort by the whole household, women and children, including home manufacture of goods for trade, the exchange of labor between households, and an extensive, often informal trade in other goods and services. While households could be said to be relatively independent, they were seldom self-sufficient.3

An increase in commercial activity in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the rise of industrial activity gradually transformed the region, and as the shire town of a recently divided Hampshire County, Northampton played a central role in an economy that stretched from the hill towns to the west, out into Hadley, Amherst, and Pelham to the northeast, and Granby, South Hadley, and Ware to the southeast. Increasingly, success in this social and economic world required flexibility in work life, and diversification of sources of income and exchange. Well situated economically and socially, the Wrights expanded from farming into a substantial business hauling freight, or as described in the Hampshire County Registrar of Deeds books, they were "joint partners in the business of common carriers."4

The Wright's family ties in the region were extensive. By 1810, there were seventeen heads of household in Northampton named Wright, most related to John and Samuel, if only distantly. By 1840, there were twenty six Wright households. Moreover, the Wrights had intermarried over the generations with other prominent families. Owning land along Bridge Street leading into the center of Northampton, The Wrights reaped the benefits of a building boom between 1809 and 1820, including the construction of a new church, county courthouse, town hall, and several store buildings.5 John and Samuel gradually increased their holdings in the rich and productive farm lands of the meadows that arced below Bridge Street along the Connecticut River.

In the early decades of the century, John (and to a lesser degree Samuel)M Wright forged a succession of partnerships to further his interests, including the firms John and Samuel Wright; Wright, Pomeroy & Co.; Wright & Edwards; and John and Edwin Wright. John wore many hats in his working life: farmer, freight hauler, laborer, cider-maker, Selectman, Assessor, Overseer of the Poor, representative of relatives in Probate Court, Guardian for individuals and families, landlord, and renter of horses, among others. For his part, Samuel centered his work on the farm, but he also engaged in freight hauling, laboring, and cider-making, especially in the 1820s. Edwin Wright shows up as his father's partner in freighting, and from the mid-1830s onward, he kept the firm's books and was principally involved in hauling freight locally.

The Wrights would seem to have had a virtual monopoly on freight hauling in Northampton during the first few decades of the nineteenth century, contracting with a who's who of merchants, businesses, and prominent families, especially those in the booming broom and palm-leaf hat businesses in Hadley and Amherst. The transition from turnpike to canal and railroad, however, had a large impact on the Wrights' business. Although the Northampton-New Haven Canal fell short of expectations in many regards, its completion in 1837 marks a shift of focus for the Wrights from distant routes to more local ones.7 By 1845, the arrival of rail in Northampton effectively ended the days of long-distance freight hauling by horse and wagon.8

The Hampshire County Register of Deeds shows the Wright brothers increasing their land holdings as their freight hauling diminished, adding lots, especially in the meadows. John Wright died of dysentery at the age of 88 in 1870, and his son Edwin followed in 1880, dead of cancer at the age of 70. Both were buried in Northampton's Bridge Street Cemetery near their homes and land. Samuel Wright died of cholera in 1880 at the age of 92 and was buried in Shrewsbury, Mass. All three were listed in the City Clerk's vital statistics register as farmers.

Scope of collection

The daybooks and ledgers kept by John, Samuel, and Edwin Wright consist of nine bound volumes and four folders of loose material, documenting the economic activity of a Northampton family over the first half of the nineteenth century.

Four Folders: The four folders contain a variety of scraps of paper with figuring and tallying on them, notes, a few letters, etc.

Detailed contents

Volume 1: John & Samuel Wrights Day Book 1818

1818-1824

Daybook

The entries follow the months and days of their business up to page 181. After that, the dates of the entries jump around and serve as a temporary catch-all for various accounts for twenty-three more pages. There then follow approximately forty blank pages. The routing is largely Northampton to Boston, with a few stops in between, and to a lesser degree, Northampton to Hartford. The items vary from whiting and cod to hats, wool, bales of cloth, chests of tea, barrels of cider, tubs of butter, salt, tallow, flour, the exchange of sides and hides of leather, carpeting, brooms, saddle trees, lemons and raisins, glue, indigo, and services such as paying the highway tax, bringing a jackass from Boston, and cash paid in Hartford for accounts and for freight brought from New York. There are a few accounts of boarders' debits and of farm sales and exchanges.

Volume 2: Samuel Wright's Northampton Apl 1824

1824

A tallied version of the entries of Book #3, which clearly lists these as running accounts, i.e., chronological, of freight hauled between Northampton and Hartford. There are no weights given to the items, but all are listed, rather, by container, i.e., hogshead (hhd), barrel (bbl), box, etc. The items are foodstuffs, dry goods, hardware, etc. Pages 82-85 are blank, and then 86 to 91 serve as tallied accounts of John and Samuel Wright, as well as some of their drivers.

Volume 3: John & Samuel Wrights Book 1824 [...] to page 77 & then John Wrights

1824-1829

Daybook

For its first 27 pages this volume is a day book, i.e., the untallied accounts of Book 2, involving freight hauling from Northampton to Hartford, and from Day's Landing to Hartford. Further looking reveals that this traffic was connected somehow to boat travel on the Connecticut, involving Day's Landing and "the falls" somewhere between Northampton and Hartford. At this time the Connecticut above Hartford was a difficult course for boats with the falls at Enfield, Connecticut, and then those at South Hadley major obstacles. In 1829, a canal was put through to circumvent the Enfield falls. Luther Clark 2nd was the hauler here for the Wrights, and was reimbursed for expenses to Hartford, at Hartford, to Falls, at Falls, over Falls, from Falls to Day's (or, sometimes, home). The first trip in March was apparently a bit experimental, and included hiring hands for help at Day's Landing and the Falls. John Wright was paid for having bought the boat from Joseph Edwards for the brothers' partnership. The boat cost \$10.00, and a horse bought at the same time cost \$70.00. Clark was reimbursed for a spike for boat, oars, and paid for "work boating and profit." This route combining land and river lasted until November of 1824, and was apparently abandoned at that point.

Pages 28 to 77 document John and Samuel's freight hauling accounts on the Boston-Northampton route up to 1827. Page 78 on is John Wright's, extending up to 1838, reflecting his work for Wright, Pomeroy & Co., and as an individual in many of his roles. His work for the Town of Northampton is fairly well documented here, as Selectman, and as Overseer of the Poor. Whether carting manure, moving fields, assessing properties, doing town books and paying school teachers, representing people in Probate Court, acting as Selectman, etc., John was always reimbursed a dollar a day for his labor. The differentiation of work's worth from lawyering to raking, cider-making to overseeing the poor was not yet in place, at least not in John Wright's world.

Volume 4

1827-1832

Pages 1 to 21 are untallied accounts of the Boston route from September 1827 to August 1828. From page 22 on, the Boston route and some local trade of 1827 to 1832 is presented in tallied accounts, i.e., listed by name with balancing on occasion of the credits and debits. Evidence of the variety of goods carried, the range of prominent Northampton citizens, cash paid and discounts given, and the increasing involvement of Edwin (b. 1810) is detailed. The back cover has a directory of names and corresponding page numbers to locate accounts.

Volume 5: Wright, Pomeroy & Co. Book Jan'y 1833 [...] to page 78 & then John & Edwin Wrights

1833-1843

References to this partnership occur through many of the books. It seems to have involved at times four men, with William Pomeroy and another being Williamsburg residents. This book is in two parts. The first, pages 1 to 77, covers the Boston-Worcester-Northampton route, 1833-1838, with almost all freight listed simply by weight, without mention of items. The rest of the book is an 1840-1857 Wilbraham to Williamsburg route, passing through Northampton, and connecting the new industries along the Mill River from Northampton, Leeds, Haydenville, Skinnerville on up to Williamsburg.

This new route may have reflected an adaptation of the Wright's, as the canal to Northampton was in, however ineffective it was, and the railroad connection was established with Western Massachusetts from Boston with a depot at Wilbraham. Two letters from William Lloyd Garrison to Northampton in 1843 mention taking "the cars" from Boston to Wilbraham and then the stage from there. Also, the Wrights' accounts occasionally show railroad fees paid for clients at the depot in Wilbraham. The Pomeroy

connection must have helped from here on, as the Wrights compiled as impressive a list of prominent names on account in the greater Williamsburg area as they did in Northampton earlier. Indeed, almost all of the names in this part of the book are Williamsburg and Haydenville residents. This section serves as the tallying of accounts in Book 7.

Volume 6
1834-1838

A disbound fragment of pages still strung together, apparently separated from a lost account book. It is of a Northampton-Boston route and covers the years 1834 to 1838. The first two years show a considerable amount of freight hauled for the Northampton Woolen Manufacturing Company. Wool, leather, axes, and brooms are the more prevalent items. Samuel Whitmarsh's silk industry's beginnings are documented here as well as in Books 4 and 5.

Volume 7: John & Edwin Wrights Book Northampton Jan'y 1840
1840

Lists the untallied accounts of Williamsburg residents and businesses that are tallied in the second half of Book 5. Edwin seems to be the principal Wright here. Again, the names serve as a roll call of prominence in the Williamsburg area.

Volume 8
1850-1852

Untitled, the small blue book appears to have been kept by Edwin Wright. Covering the years 1850-1852, it seems almost a continuation of Book 7, though omitting the years 1846-1850. Again, all the routing is to and from Williamsburg. The items hauled are clearly for households, stores, and factories, with industry predominating.

Volume 9: John & Edwin Wrights act Book Jan'y 1856
1856-1859

Covers the last years of the decade up to 1859. Most of the activity in the volume is based in Williamsburg, with many entries for Haydenville and Leeds, and many of the successful industries of the area appear among the Wrights' clients. Mattresses, pickles, bedsteads, bales of silk, dyestuffs, soap, clapboards, limes, carboys, sumac, brick, iron kettles, plaster, skeins of yarn, suspenders, and doors are some of the items brought to Williamsburg. Shipped out are crates, coat hooks, boxes, silk, leather, warp beams, boxes of cloth, wool, keys, tools, pails, tubs of butter, etc.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Charles Apfelbaum, 1987

1 From The Pynchon Papers Vol. I, III, quoted in Stephen C. Innes, "A Patriarchal Society: Economic Dependency and Social Order in Springfield, Massachusetts, 1636-1702," Ph.D Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1978, p. 216.

2 Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts 1780-1990*, Ithaca, NY, 1990.

3 Ibid.

4 Hampshire County Record Books, Registry of Deeds, many entries.

5 Clark, p. 174.

6 George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860*, NY, 1951, p. 15-28.

7 William P. Donovan, "The New Haven and Northampton Canal" in *The Northampton Book*, compiled and edited by The Tercentenary History Committee, Northampton, Mass., 1954, p. 85-88.

8 Caroline MacGill, ed., *History of Transportation in the U.S. before 1860*, Washington, 1917, p. 334.

Processing Information

Processed by Paul Gaffney, 1990.

Language:

English

Acknowledgments

Encoding funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Cite as: John Wright Ledgers (MS 162). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Search terms

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Williamsburg (Mass.)--Economic conditions--19th century
Wright, Edwin
Wright, Samuel

Contributors

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Wright, Edwin
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