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A Description of The Russell Papers in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania


It was with much pleasure and satisfaction that, when in London last August, I handed Mr. Boies Penrose certain papers, letters, account-books, sketches and plans of land, which may be referred to briefly as 'The Russell Papers.' These Mr. Penrose had kindly undertaken to convey to you, as a gift from myself and my sister, Mrs. Alexander Scott of 117 Hamilton Terrace, London, N.W.8.

These documents relate chiefly to the wide-spread business interests and varied activities in America of our great grandfather, William Russell, sometime of Birmingham, England. They include details of his speculations in land, his colonizing efforts, his loans to American debtors, etc.

When about thirty years ago, my father asked Mr. S. H. Jeyes to deal with our old family diaries, and to condense the mass of this material into the form of a book [The Russells of Birmingham, in the French Revolution and in America, 1791-1814], it was not considered advisable to introduce finance or business matters into what was a book of biography, travel, and adventures.

Thus our large collection of letters and account-books remained untouched and unheeded in an old trunk in the roof-space. In fact, neither we nor our friends had sufficient knowledge of accountancy or financial transactions to be able to gauge the nature of the records contained in the pile of old ledgers etc.

It was my good fortune to undertake for Mr. Russell and Mrs. Scott the task of scrutinizing these manuscript remains in an effort to ascertain their contents and historical value. The letters—some of them copies of originals preserved for business reasons—and other manuscripts were found to be 1,874 in number, and there were thirty-four ledgers and account-books, besides the maps and book of pencil

1 London, George Allen & Company, Ltd., 1911.
sketches. Chronologically the papers extended from 1762 to 1869, though the majority of them dated from 1790 to 1840. The contents pertained almost exclusively to the business interests of the great grandfather of the donors and to the prolonged efforts of his executors to liquidate and settle his estate. Collectively, the documents provide valuable source materials for a case study in business history as illustrated by the enterprise of a Birmingham merchant who flourished in the era of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. Moreover, as William Russell owned shares in some of the earliest iron works in Virginia and Maryland, subscribed to plans for establishing colonies of English dissenters and political refugees in America, and invested heavily in American lands—mostly in Pennsylvania—the documents supply important materials relating to the early iron industry and to sales of Pennsylvania lands in the first half of the nineteenth century.

When the manuscripts had been catalogued and their historical value confirmed, Mr. Russell and Mrs. Scott, with great generosity and public-spiritedness, desired to place them in public depositories where they might be preserved permanently and made available to historical students. Accordingly, twenty-five of the account-books and ledgers and 395 of the letters and other documents, all of which pertain almost exclusively to William Russell's business affairs in England, France, and elsewhere in Europe, were presented to the Trustees of the British Museum and are available in the Manuscript Reading Room; some ninety of the letters, purely local in nature, were given to the Public Reference Library in Birmingham; and the remainder of the letters and documents, together with account-books and other materials cited, were presented to Mr. Boies Penrose, who received them for the Society and brought them from London to Philadelphia. An itemized catalogue of the entire collection, prepared by the present writer, together with an indication of the exact divisions made among the three depositories, was placed with the documents in the Library of the Society.

William Russell (1740-1818), of whose literary remains these manuscripts form the major portion, was a Birmingham merchant,
View of Middletown, Connecticut, drawn by Miss M. Russell about 1799-1801
philanthropist, and Unitarian Liberal. The eldest son of a well-to-do Birmingham family which had prospered in iron-mongering since the days of Cromwell, he inherited considerable property (including shares in colonial iron-works), and from about 1760 to 1794 he engaged in a variety of business enterprises, principally trade in “Birmingham Wares,” and became one of Birmingham’s most progressive and public-spirited citizens. During the American War for Independence he befriended American prisoners of war in England; he was active in petitioning Parliament for an “Act for laying open and widening certain ways and passages within the Town of Birmingham, and for cleansing and lighting the streets, ways, lanes, and passages there, and for removing and preventing nuisances and obstructions therein”—an Act which was passed in 1769;* and after Joseph Priestley moved to Birmingham in 1780, William Russell became his patron and most ardent supporter. For such liberal sentiments and activities and for sympathetic participation in celebrating the achievements of the French Revolution at a dinner party held on the eve of Bastille Day, 1791, the Birmingham Rioters burned his home, wrecked his business establishment, and endangered his life. For a time thereafter he retired to the country and waited for party feeling to die away; but when war was declared on France he liquidated his remaining business interests in England and decided to join Priestley in America. With his son and two daughters—his wife had died in a traffic accident in 1790—and a few passengers to lighten the expense he set sail from Falmouth in the mid-summer of 1794 on a privately chartered American vessel. Before the passengers had gained their sea-legs, the vessel was overtaken by a French frigate, its English passengers removed and, subsequently, placed on a series of prison ships in Brest harbor. There, while Russell and his family endured hardship, worry, and privation, American friends prevailed upon the American Consul-General, Fulwar Skipwith, and Ambassador James Monroe to petition the Committee of Public Safety for their release. After almost five months incarceration, the Russells were permitted to go to Paris for the winter (1794-95). In the early months of 1795, Russell, out of gratitude to his American friends, entered into several business ventures with Fulwar Skipwith and others, all of which proved unprofitable and, in the case of Skipwith, litigations arose

which filled the correspondence for twenty years after William Russell’s death. A much more fortunate investment was the purchase from the French revolutionary government of a large ecclesiastical property near Caen, which the revolutionists had confiscated for the redemption of assignats.

Finally, in the summer of 1795, the Russells continued their interrupted voyage to America. However, a visit to Northumberland caused them to recoil from frontier life, even in the stimulating and enjoyable company of Dr. Priestley; and after a winter in Philadelphia they sought the quiet rusticity of Middletown, Connecticut, where Russell purchased a house and where he and his family made their home until 1801.

Meanwhile, Russell and his son, Thomas, endeavored to collect old debts owed the former Birmingham firm by American distributors, and to recover lands and iron works confiscated in Maryland and Virginia during the American Revolution. For some of the old debts William Russell accepted lands, and he invested in other lands until his American properties totalled more than 35,000 acres, consisting principally of forty-four tracts in Lycoming County (the Loyalsock Lands), twenty-two tracts in Luzerne County (Lackawanna Lands), and twenty-four tracts in Cunningham’s District of Depreciation Lands (appropriated by Act of March 12, 1783), about thirty miles from Pittsburgh on “Little Conquesing Creek”—all in Pennsylvania. The purchase, oversight, and ultimate sales of these properties, together with some smaller holdings which Russell acquired, led him to engage various agents; and after the Russells left America in 1801 the correspondence of these men with William Russell and with his son and executor, Thomas Russell, constituted the bulk of the documents now in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The letters, memoranda, and financial statements supply valuable information about the sales of Pennsylvania lands, tax troubles, squatter troubles, and the effect of immigration and internal improvements, together with much information about the agents themselves, some of whom were well known figures in Pennsylvania.

Chief among these American representatives were William Rawle, prominent Philadelphia attorney, author, and first President of the Historical Society, who, with his son, Edward, served as legal counsel for William Russell and his heirs. Russell’s first general agent in charge of his American interests was Hugh Roberts, of “Pine Grove
near Philadelphia” (now Richmond Street in Philadelphia). As a member of his father’s firm, George Roberts & Son, Hugh Roberts had formerly served as commission broker for Russell’s Birmingham wares and, though he relinquished his agency for Russell in 1803, he acted as friendly advisor and correspondent until after 1830. John Philip De Gruchy (d. 1830), a distiller of Northumberland, served as principal agent for the Russell interests from 1803 until 1828, when he turned over the cares to Joseph Rayner Priestley, son of Dr. Priestley and a banker in Northumberland. Priestley was the last of the Russell agents in America. He had oversight of the properties and conducted sales of the lands for William Russell’s heirs until after the decease of the immediate heirs; and when the American Civil War began, Thomas Russell’s widow became apprehensive and instructed Priestley to sell all the remaining American lands. Priestley did so—at half the face value of the properties—and closed his agency on November 1, 1862, after more than thirty years’ service to the Russell family.

Besides the principal agents, a number of lesser representatives and other business associates appear in the correspondence. An incomplete list includes: Samuel Wallis, engaged by Mr. Russell to purchase lands for him before he came to America and described as a “land-jobber & surveyor near Northumberland”; Anthony Watson of Northumberland; Colonel Presley Neville of Pittsburgh; Zaccheus Walker and Samuel Fox, both of Philadelphia; Charles Vaughan of Boston; Andrew Tulloh of Williamsport (died about 1802); Charles A. Barnitz, local agent, and Ralph Bowie, attorney, both of York; Matthew T. Russell (no relative of William Russell) of Middleton, Connecticut; Peter Jay Monroe, of New York; John Weston, of Hartford County, Maryland; and Thomas Gibbs Morgan, a sharp attorney at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, William Augustine Washington also appears in the correspondence in connection with the Accokeek Lands of the old Principio Company, the iron-works in which William Russell had inherited an interest; and Robert Stanard, a lawyer of Fredericksburg, Virginia, served as attorney for the Russell interests in this property.

In their business transactions, William Russell and his son, Thomas, travelled widely in the northeastern parts of the country and the

account-books show that they dealt with such business firms as the Bank of Pennsylvania, the Bank of the United States, Edward Shoemaker, Merchant, and Richard Wister, Merchant, all in Philadelphia. In Boston, the Russells negotiated with Adams and Loring, Joseph Foster, Zachariah Hicks, Samuel Torrey, and John Coffyn Jones; in New York, with Benjamin Bakewell, Anthony L. Bleecker & Sons, and John Brown & Son; and in Baltimore William Slater was their chief business associate.

Socially, the Russells were received in the best circles. When Priestley visited William Russell in Philadelphia, in February, 1796, he reported, "We found him engaged to drink tea with the President, where we accompanied him, and spent two hours as in any private family." During the next year, when Russell went on a business trip into Virginia, he visited the first ex-president and wrote of it to his daughters:  

But you will be expecting to hear what is become of my promised visit at Mount Vernon where I hoped for a little relaxation. I left Alexandria yesterday with a full intention of dining there but behold, at a short distance from the House, I met General & Mrs. Washington, in their State Coach with 4 Horses. They both knew me at once, & expressed real concern that they were under a particular engagement to Dine at Alexandria, but He told me they should be at Home in the evening. However, I did not chuse to lose a day in that manner & therefore excused myself then, but promised to make my visit upon my return, when very probably Winter may be sett in, & abridge it to a single day. Both the Old General and Mrs W. appeared to be in better health than I ever saw in their Countenances in Philadelphia, & they both said they thought themselves to be so. She enquired after my Daughters very cheerfully & seemed pleased to hear you were so well in health & so pleased with your situation in Middletown.

Late in the following November Mr. Russell made the promised visit:  

... I reached Mount Vernon in the following morning before General Washington was prepared for his Morning's ride & gained two mornings with him instead of one, which was all I should otherwise have allowed myself—two very interesting mornings they were to me & if I can trust my own Judgment & the repeated & very Cordiall invitations he again & again gave me at Parting, I

8 Same to same, Bladensburg, Md., Nov. 27, 1797, ibid., IX, 6. William Russell's hearing was impaired as a result of illness during his incarceration on the French prison ships in Brest Harbor and it grew progressively worse until the end of his life.
really believe he was not a little pleased with my visit. Mrs. Washington I found the same attentive good humored old Lady she has always appeared to us. They were quite alone, but had an Invalid in the House whom Mrs. W. announced to me but I did not hear what she said. My hearing was very bad & still continues so to my very great mortification, but I have no remedy but patience & therefore endeavor to acquiesce as cheerfully as I can. I proceeded from Mount Vernon to Alexandria where I had some business...

In 1798, Russell’s accounts show that he purchased fifteen bushells of seed wheat from “General Washington,” and in the last harvest which the great General witnessed at his Mount Vernon estate, William Russell bought a “Straw Cutting Machine of Gen’l Washington for $30.”

However, despite American investments and social acceptance, the Russells did not like America. William Russell disliked the moral tone of American society, and his son and daughters deplored the uncultivated tastes of Americans and the lack of such intellectual and cultural opportunities as they had been accustomed to in the Old World. Martha, the eldest daughter, married an English suitor and returned to England in 1799; and two years later, having arranged his American affairs to his satisfaction, William Russell returned to Europe and his remaining son and daughter visited their sister and old friends in England. On July 3, 1801, William Russell arrived at Hamburg, where he wished to attend to some business matters left over from his previous European residence. After the Treaty of Amiens had been signed he went to France and looked into the condition of his French properties. He intended soon to join his family in England, but while in Paris in 1802 he received letters from his family advising him of the Acts of Parliament which had made it an act of high treason for an Englishman to acquire French property during the late war, and which rendered Russell’s return to England inexpedient, if not dangerous, without preliminary petitions and explanations to and legal arrangements with His Majesty’s Government. Before a satisfactory settlement of the question had been made, war was renewed between England and France and Russell was compelled to spend the remainder of the Napoleonic era on his French estate near Caen. Fortunately, his son, Thomas, had joined him in

9 Account-Books V, unpaged, under dates of Oct. 9, 1798, and Aug. 13, 1799, respectively.
10 33 Geo. III, Chapter 27; and 38 Geo. III, Chapter 79.
1802, and, though Thomas became restless and spent much of his time in Paris, he gave much comfort to his father and facilitated his departure to England after Napoleon's downfall. During these twelve years William Russell engaged in agriculture on his French lands, and the letters and documents pertaining to this era are among the papers presented to the British Museum. In 1814, both William and Thomas Russell returned to England, where William died, January 26, 1818. Russell's French and English properties were disposed of by his heirs and executors by about 1825, but his American lands were not totally alienated until Joseph R. Priestley sold the last of his Pennsylvania property for Thomas Russell's widow in 1862.

*The University of Illinois*  
RAYMOND PHINEAS STEARNS

Both father and son were held at Caen as French prisoners of war for a time in 1803-4, but were freed upon the intercession of the American minister, Livingston, who claimed them as American citizens. See Russell Papers, XX, 24.