

**Sturgis Library Archives
Henry Crocker Kittredge Collection**

**MS. COLL. 4
Inventory of the William Rotch Papers**

Volume: 1 Linear Foot

Provenance: Gift of Walter E. Babbitt

Restrictions: None stated

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Rotch, prominent shipowner and resolute Quaker friend, was born October 4, 1734 on Nantucket into a family already involved in whale fisheries. He married Elizabeth Barney, also of Nantucket, on October 31, 1754.

When the American Revolution erupted, Rotch maintained the pacifist stance of his Quaker religion, which in turn reflected the official policy of neutrality adopted by Nantucket. The island suffered much for its political and geographical vulnerability, as did Rotch himself and the whaling business overall. The British fleet ransacked Rotch's and other ships sailing from Nantucket, as well as harrassing its sailors and citizens. In 1779, Rotch was part of a committee of three appointed by the island to represent its case to the commanders of the British Army and Navy in Newport. Their appeals finally met with satisfaction in the guarantee that the pillages would cease.

Subsequent to these appeals, Rotch and others were charged with high treason by Thomas Jenkins, also of Nantucket and a patriot, for going to a British port without the consent of the court. The complaint was heard by a joint committee of the House and Senate in 1780 and partially discharged, by the House. Full liberty was restored to the defendants with the resolution of the War.

Still, despite the guarantees of safe passage, war had ravaged the island to a state of desperation, and virtually decimated the once thriving whaling business. In 1785, Rotch and his son Benjamin traveled to England to petition William Pitt for special privileges from the British government to remove Nantucket's whale fisheries operation to England. After an initial series of excessive and unreasonable demands by Pitt, followed by four months of apparent apathy in the matter, Rotch abandoned his petition in England and turned instead to France. His appeal here approved, he carried out the buiness of whaling from Dunkirk from 1786-94, employing many Nantucket captains and seamen.

While in France, Rotch associated with a number of influential people, including Calonne, Vergennes, DeCastro, Mirabeau, Rabant de St. Etienne, and Tallyrand. In 1791, Rotch

presented a petition for privileges and exemptions on the basis of Quaker principles before the National Assembly at Paris, which was subsequently ratified. He made a final hour departure from a volatile France in 1793, with the outbreak of the French Revolution. He continued to transact his whaling business out of Milford Haven, England. He eventually settled in and retired to New Bedford, leaving a prosperous legacy to the management of his sons. Rotch died in New Bedford on May 16, 1828.

It is of incidental interest that Mr. Rotch played a part in several key junctures of the American Revolution. The ship Dartmouth, from which the tea was thrown into Boston Harbor on December 16, 1773, was a Rotch vessel. William Rotch was also the owner of the ship Bedford, which was the first to display and carry the American flag into British waters, on February 3, 1783.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

William Rotch, 1734-1828, and originally from Nantucket and later New Bedford, was a developmental force in the whale fisheries business, both along the New England Coast and abroad. In the course of his life and the transaction of his business, he became involved in a great many historical events, and with influential figures. He was a man of both acute business sense and moral profundity. He led a life of whole-hearted service to his Quaker principles, to the welfare of Nantucket, and to the success of whaling.

These papers are an open collection, originated from an initial donation of material collected by the late Walter Babbitt of Brewster. Most of the subjects are accompanied by Mr. Babbitt's own handwritten lists of the individual documents within each subject heading, dates and persons involved.

The William Rotch Papers currently consist of one series, designated as Merchant Records. This material covers the period 1793-1833, and is almost exclusively of a business and professional nature. The Merchant Records Series relates to such matters as commercial banking, the mechanics, transactions, and politics of trade and commerce, merchant accounts, price fixtures and quotes, petitions of commission agents and firms, and the economic and political ramifications of such historical events as the French Revolution, the War of 1812, and unrest in Spain and Chile. In addition, the biographic material included at the beginning of this series relates to the American Revolution and its effect on the whaling industry, Nantucket, and William Rotch himself.

It should be noted that material dated around the turn of the century and after is directed more towards William Rotch's sons, who had by then assumed active control of the family shipping business from their aging father.

William Rotch Papers Container List

Series I: Merchant Records

Box Folder Contents

- 1 1 Biographical Material, General
- 1 2 Memorandum by Wm. Rotch
- 1 3 Correspondence 1812-April, 1815
- 1 4 Correspondence May, 1815-1833
- 1 5 Account Books 1816-1820
- 1 6 Receipts and Promissory Notes 1793-1821
- 1 7 Receipts and Promissory Notes 1822-1833
- 1 8 Shipping Papers 1802-1833
- 2 1 Cashier Checks 1817-April 1818
- 2 2 Cashier Checks May-July 1818
- 2 3 Cashier Checks August-December 1818
- 2 4 Cashier Checks 1819-1826

in Oversize Box AA of Kittredge Maritime Collection:

- AA 2 10 items: Hemp Specifications, Ship America, 1802 Account Receipt, ship Wareham, April 4, 1804 Account, Stock Number 23, May 10, 1814 Account with James Arnold, Schooner Clipper, 1814-1815 Account with George Hitch, 1814-1817 Costs of prosecution and final settlement of the ship Resolution, Oct. 6, 1815 Account, Ship Frances, 1815-1817 Account with Moses Goodrich, schooner Status Ante Bellum, 1816 Account with John Russel, February, 1819 Account with Fish & Grinnell, June 30, 1819
- AA 3 7 Items: Account with Seth Russell & Sons, 1819 Disbursement on Brig Elizabeth, Oct. 29, 1821 Sales Account, Rio Grande Hides, sloop Pomona, July 1, 1824 Account, Ship Sophia, July 1, 1829 Graph chart of goods, n.d. Exports list to America from St. Petersburg, n.d. Account of William J. Rotch with Herbert L. Perry, 1887