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Signers Day

Arthur Mitchell Fraas

University of Pennsylvania, fraas@upenn.edu

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Signers Day

Abstract

Contextual essay on signatures in the Hale Signers Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

Keywords

Manuscripts, Declaration of Independence, Autographs

Disciplines

History

Comments

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

04 Signers Day

Wednesday
Jul 2012

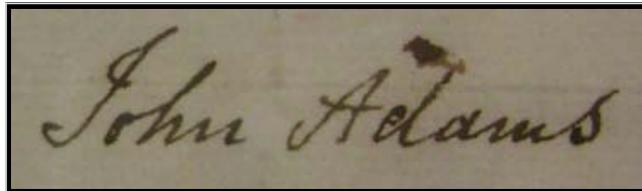
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UPenn Ms. Coll. 621

It's challenging to try and pick out just one unique item from our collection to celebrate Independence Day. In 1776 the University of Pennsylvania was located just a few blocks away from Independence Hall and several of those present at the Second Continental Congress had ties to the University. It seems fitting then to feature the Libraries' **Hale Signers Collection** (Ms. Coll. 621). This collection consists of an assortment of documents – each of which bear the signature of one of the **56 men** who signed the Declaration of Independence [1].



– John Adams autograph from the Hale Signers Collection on a **receipt dated 1762**.



– John Hancock's unmistakable autograph from the Hale Signers Collection on a **letter dated 14 May 1773**.

century by John Mills Hale of Philipsburg, Pa. and given to the University after his death. The collection is not only interesting for its

The collection was assembled over the



– Benjamin Franklin's

WELCOME

Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense "unique" - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside.

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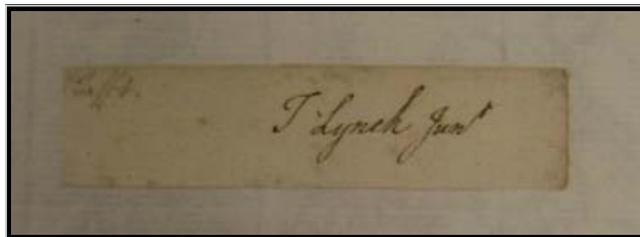
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artifactual value but also for understanding historical memory and nationalism in the nineteenth century. Penn's Hale collection has been used by researchers interested in how the idea of "founding fathers" and "signers" was constructed in the early United States. For those interested in reading an in-depth account of how autograph mania and the historical memory of the founding of the US intersected, Josh Lauer (formerly a Penn graduate student and now a professor at UNH) has written the best [account](#) [2].

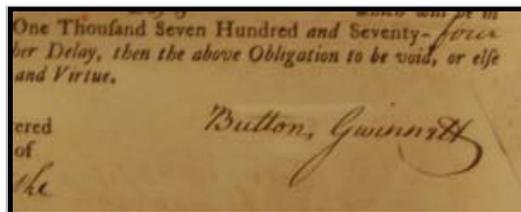
autograph from the Hale Signers Collection on a [letter dated 17 January 1767](#).

Amassing a complete collection of signers autographs is extremely difficult today but was also no easy task for Hale. You might think that a Jefferson or Franklin autograph would be hardest to find, but collectors have long had the most difficulty finding signatures for two more obscure signers, Thomas Lynch Jr. and Button Gwinnett.



— [Clipped autograph](#) of Thomas Lynch Jr. from the Hale Signers Collection.

Lynch represented South Carolina at the convention but is perhaps more famous as the only signer with no known place of burial for he died in a shipwreck in 1779, just three years after signing the declaration. Note that Lynch's signature in the Hale collection has been clipped from another document – indicating just how hard it was for Hale to find signers' autographs in their original context.



— Autograph of Button Gwinnett from the Hale Signers Collection on a [document dated 8 July 1774](#).

Gwinnett, who represented Georgia at the convention, also died soon after the convention. He was killed in a duel in 1777 with Gen.

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Alexander Devine

Dianne Mitchell

Jacqueline Burek

Regan Kladstrup

Marissa Nicosia

Mitch Fraas

Michael P. Williams

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Nancy Shawcross

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Lachlan McIntosh, both have counties in Georgia named after them today. Because they both died young and well before the fame of the signers caught on, their signatures are extremely difficult to obtain, Gwinnett's can obtain six-figure prices at auction and only exists in **51 known examples**. Hale's copy of Gwinnett's autograph comes from a printed mercantile document. In fact of all the known Gwinnett signatures all but one come from such ephemeral documents rather than actual correspondence [3].

Enjoy the Holiday and look out for stray Gwinnett's and Lynch's the next time you visit a flea market!

[1] For a full listing of the documents and signatures which comprise the Hale collection see [here](#).

[2] Josh Lauer, "Traces of the Real: Autographomania and the Cult of the Signers in Nineteenth-Century America," *Text and Performance Quarterly* Vol. 27, No. 2, April 2007, pp. 143-163.

[3] Ryan Speer, Button Gwinnett Signatures:A Census.
<http://www.manuscript.org/ButtonGwinnett.pdf>

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About Mitch Fraas

Mitch Fraas is the Scholar in Residence at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. He is also the interim director of the Penn digital humanities forum. At Penn, Mitch works on a variety of projects cutting across general and special collections, with a special focus on digital humanities. He holds doctoral and master's degrees in history from Duke University and earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College. His doctoral dissertation examined the legal culture of British India in the 17th and 18th centuries, arguing for the existence of a unified early modern British imperial legal culture whether in Philadelphia, Bombay, or London.

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