

1768

SMITH, PETER, 1768-1837
PAPERS, 1763-1850
30 boxes, 4 pkgs. (16 lin. ft.)

Biographical Sketch

Peter Smith, landowner and father of Gerrit Smith, was a man of significant influence during the first quarter of the nineteenth century in Madison County, New York, where he was active in business, politics and land transactions, and owner of a large portion of the central and northern sections of the county.

Peter was born in Greenbush, Rockland County, New York, on November 15, 1768, the son of Garrit P. and Myntje Lent Smith, both of Dutch extraction. In 1784 he entered the counting house of Abraham Herring & Co. in New York City as a clerk. When he was nineteen years old, he opened a store at Fall Hill, near Little Falls, New York. During these years he went into partnership with John Jacob Astor in the fur trade, and although the partnership lasted only about a year, Smith and Astor continued for many years in the joint business of buying and selling land. Smith acquired a large fortune over the years by shrewd procedures in land transactions, both with Astor and alone, handling over the years about 500,000 acres altogether.

In 1789, Peter Smith moved to Old Fort Schuyler, now Utica, where he established a store and continued his speculations in land. In 1794, John Jacob Astor and William Laight bought the Charlotte River and Byrne's Patent of 37,200 acres in the Mohawk Valley. Astor lent Peter Smith the money with which to purchase half of the tract. In 1829 Smith bought out Astor's and Laight's half interest and became owner of the entire patent.

Peter Smith obtained another large tract, this time 50,000 acres, from the Oneida Indians in 1793. He had established friendly relations with the Indians, among whom he seems to have exerted some influence, and became a close friend of the Oneida chief, Skenandoah, for whom he named his first son, Peter Skenandoah Smith. This "New Petersburgh Tract" comprised the towns of Augusta in Oneida County, and Stockbridge, Smithfield, Fenner, and northern Cazenovia in Madison County. Federal law forbade the Indians to sell their land, so Smith leased it for 21

years. In 1795 the state purchased a large part of the Oneida reservation, including Smith's tract. He had leased portions of it to white settlers; now they and Peter Smith alike had to pay the state about \$3.50 per acre to obtain their patents. Smith emerged from this transaction with about 22,300 acres.

By 1806, Peter had established the town of Smithfield, and, within it, the village of Peterboro, Madison County. The village consisted of ten buildings including Peter's home, which became known as the "mansion house" in later years, after it had been enlarged by Peter's son Gerrit.

In 1807, the first officers of Madison County were elected, and Peter Smith, a confirmed Federalist, was elected supervisor of the town of Smithfield at its first town meeting. Also in 1807, he was appointed judge of the Madison County Court. Peter Smith began publication of the Madison Freeholder, of which he was the "proprietor", in 1808 in Peterboro. This and another publication started simultaneously in another town of the county, were the first news and "literary" papers in the area.

On February 5, 1792, Peter had married Elizabeth Livingston, daughter of revolutionary army Colonel James Livingston. The records indicate that at least three of their children grew to adulthood: Cornelia, Peter Skenandoah, and Gerrit. Elizabeth died in 1818, and in 1823, Peter married Sarah Pogson of Charleston, South Carolina. This marriage was unsuccessful and short-lived, ending in a separation and Sarah's return to Charleston.

Peter Smith lived in Peterboro until 1819, carrying out his public duties, managing his lands and related businesses, and rearing his family. In 1819, he turned over the management of his estates and business to his son Gerrit, retaining the income of \$125,000 for his own use. He spent many of his last years traveling. For many years he had been concerned about the state of his soul, and after the death of his first wife, his religious concerns mounted to a near obsession. He was active in the Madison County Bible Society, the American Bible Society, and the American Tract Society. As he traveled about, he made it his business to distribute religious tracts in every community he visited.

Peter Smith settled finally in Schenectady in 1825. He had been a man of personal as well as religious peculiarities for much of his life. Now in his later life, in spite of his financial successes, he grew morose, claiming that he was "a trouble to himself and a vexation to those about him." He died at Schenectady on April 14, 1837.

Description

The Peter Smith Papers, 1763-1850, are divided into correspondence, 1791-1837; business and land files, 1768-1850; and writings, 1798-1821.

Correspondence, 1791-1837, which includes incoming letters and drafts of outgoing letters, is arranged chronologically by year, month and day. Letters dated only to the year are placed at the beginning of the year. All undated correspondence after the 1837 letters and is arranged alphabetically by the author's last name. There are approximately 1580 incoming letters. The correspondence is concerned primarily with Smith's business and land interests, although there is reference to politics, religion, and family affairs. Important correspondents include John Jacob Astor, Daniel Cady, William E. Dodge, Abraham Herring, Elbert Herring, Thomas Herring, Samuel Hoard, Elisha Kane, John Kiersted, William Laight, Edward William Laight, William Lamont, Robert Lenox, Samuel McNeil, Samuel H. Payne, Elisha Smith, Ezra Stiles, Lawrence Vrooman, Nathan Ward, and Elisha Williams.

A revised index to the correspondence, prepared by the staff of the George Arents Research Library, indexes all incoming, outgoing, and other letters. The entries are arranged alphabetically by the last name of the writer and then chronologically under each name. If there is more than one letter from the same person on the same date each letter is listed. Unidentified correspondents follow the letter Z.

The outgoing letters are primarily drafts prepared by Peter Smith, usually in pencil, for his clerk to copy. The earliest separate draft is dated 1800. Notes concerning Peter Smith's replies appear on some letter beginning ca. 1813, and complete drafts on the incoming letter begin in 1816. Drafts of Peter Smith's letters to John Jacob Astor date from 1808 to 1829. All told there are approximately 180 separate drafts of Peter Smith's replies, listed in the revised index, incoming letters that carry complete drafts of replies or extensive abstracts are indicated by asterisks (*). A few other letters that were not written to or by Peter Smith are also indexed.

Business and Land Files 1763-1850, contains Peter Smith's extensive business, legal, and financial papers relating to

his large land holdings in central New York state. The files are arranged in four sections, namely: financial documents, 1771-1850; land documents, 1767-1849; legal documents, 1772-1840; and a subject file, 1763-1837. A detailed listing of the contents of each of these four sections is provided in the shelf list. In organizing these sections loose papers were interfiled with volumes. In the shelf list, brackets are used to indicate supplied titles. It should be noted that the terms blotter and day book are synonymous.

Financial documents, 1771-1850, include Peter Smith's miscellaneous account books, 1808-1850; as well as account books for the Old Fort Schuyler store, 1788-1803; Oriskany Creek store, 1796-1802; and the Peterboro store, 1807-1821. Also included in this section are bank deposit and withdrawal books, 1801-1837; bills and receipts, 1771-1837; lists of outstanding loans, 1790-1836; orders drawn, 1820-1821; and miscellaneous material, 1792-1837.

Land documents, 1767-1850 include descriptions of lots and acreage, 1806-1833; lists of land holdings, 1805-1846; and the names and maps for military tract grantees. Also included in this section are the records of land purchases and sales, 1788-1849, primarily relating to the New Petersburgh tract (formerly part of the Oneida Indian Reservation), lands purchased from New York State at tax sales, the Charlotte River and Byrne's Patent, and the Old Military Tract; this section also includes surveyor's documents and some maps relating to these lands.

Legal documents, 1772-1840, relate primarily to Smith's extensive land holdings and his position as county judge. Included in this section are land purchase agreements, ca. 1799-1837; bonds, 1792-1836; charges to the grand jury, 1800-1821; contracts for land sales, 1814-1821; deeds and indentures, 1772-1837; leases, 1800-1840; mortgages, 1809-1830; powers of attorney, 1801-1835; promissory notes, 1790-1831; legal suits, 1790-1839; summonses and complaints, 1799-1830; and miscellaneous legal documents, 1791-1837.

Subject file, 1793-1763, includes financial papers regarding Smith's grindstone business, 1814-1826; his lease with the Oneida Indians for a portion of their reservation, 1793; financial, land and legal records, 1795-1837, with John Jacob Astor and William Laight for the purchase of the Charlotte River and Byrne's Patent; and a copy of the will of Sir William Johnson and other legal papers, 1763-1798, resulting from Astor, Laight and Smith's struggles to get clear title to the Charlotte River and Byrne's Patent.

Writings, 1798-1821, include Peter Smith's miscellaneous prose and verse and a journal of a trip from Albany to Johnstown in 1822.

Note: After ca. 1818 Gerrit Smith assumed more of his father's business obligations. Researchers interested in this later period should consult the Gerrit Smith Papers.

Provenance

Gift of Gerrit Smith Miller, 1928

OUTLINE OF ARRANGEMENT

Boxes 1-5 CORRESPONDENCE, 1791-1837 and n. d.

Boxes 6-30 BUSINESS AND LAND FILES, 1763-1850

Financial Documents, 1771-1850

Account books

Bank books

Bills and receipts

Loans outstanding

Orders drawn

Miscellaneous material

Land Documents, 1767-1849

Description of lots and acreage

Land books forwarded to Federal Dana

Lists of land

Military Tract grantees

Purchases and sales

Redemption certificates from the State of

New York for overdue taxes on land

Surveyor's documents

General

Charlotte River and Byrne's Patent

New Petersburg

Miscellaneous material

Legal Documents, 1772-1840

Agreements on land purchases

Bonds

Charges to the grand jury

Contracts for land sales

Deeds and indentures

Leases

Mortgages

Powers of attorney

Promissory notes

Suits

Summonses and complaints

Miscellaneous legal documents

Subject File, 1763-1837

Grindstone business

Oneida Nation

Partnership with John Jacob Astor and

William Laight

Sir William Johnson's will in a contemporary
copy, and related documents

Box 30

WRITINGS, 1798-1821