



Jean Maguire is Library Director at NEHGS.

The L. Dennis Shapiro Collection of Revolutionary War Papers

Earlier this year, NEHGS received an exceptional donation of Revolutionary War-era manuscripts from member L. Dennis Shapiro. Dennis began collecting manuscript letters (or, to use a more specific term from the field of manuscript collecting, “autograph letters signed”) in the mid-1980s. His collection focuses on Americana, primarily presidential and weighted toward the earlier presidents. John Adams and John Quincy Adams are Dennis’s particular favorites.

About ten years ago, Dennis attended an Americana autograph and manuscript auction in Los Angeles. At the end of the auction, some unsold lots remained, including a collection of Revolutionary-era documents. The auction curator asked Dennis if he might be interested in this Massachusetts collection since he hailed from the Boston area. Dennis felt that the manuscripts did belong in Massachusetts. He decided to accept responsibility for finding them a permanent caretaker. Recognizing that the documents would be useful for genealogical research, he chose NEHGS as their permanent home.

The bulk of the collection relates to Middleborough, Massachusetts. Located in the southeastern part of the state, in Plymouth County, the town was settled in 1660 and incorporated in 1669. Of the twenty-five documents in the Shapiro collection, seventeen

are connected with Middleborough. In addition, the collection includes manuscripts from Rochester, Taunton, and Wareham and Tiverton, Rhode Island. The collection contains military rosters and returns, receipts, and letters.

Among the Middleborough manuscripts is a 1777–78 return of all male inhabitants, sixteen years and older, who belonged to “the district of the First Foot Company in the Fourth Regiment in the County of Plymouth at home and abroad on the first day of January 1777.” Somewhat amusingly, the list is described as “a true return, errors excepted.” The document was sent to Major John Nelson in Middleborough, listing 232 males, and included the surnames Cobb, Raymond, Tinkham, and Wood, among many others. The return also lists three men who seem to be African American: Cuffee White, Quacke, and Prince. A document like this one can be of great value to researchers as it offers, in effect, a census substitute of a town’s inhabitants—although limited to males of a certain age.

According to Ebenezer Weaver Peirce’s *Historic Sketches of Hanson, Lakeville, Mattapoisett, Middleboro’, Pembroke, Plympton, Rochester, Wareham, and West Bridgewater* (1873), John Nelson (1737–1803) was commissioned a lieutenant of the Fourth Company in Middleborough about 1773, promoted to junior or second major of the Fourth Regiment, Plymouth County Militia, on May 9, 1776, and Colonel on July 1, 1781. Nelson was also for many years a

President and CEO Brenton Simons, donor Dennis Shapiro, and Library Director Jean Maguire showing a manuscript letter from the Shapiro collection. May 2018.





Above: Thomas Jeffreys, detail of *New England* (1776). Middleborough is marked. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection. Above right: "Return of all the male inhabitants from sixteen years and upward that belong to the District of the First Foot Company in the Fourth Regiment in the County of Plymouth... on the first day of January 1777."

justice of the peace for Plymouth County, and a Middleborough selectman. As a major he served both in Rhode Island and at New Bedford (then Dartmouth). He married Hope Rounsevell (d. 1820) of East Freetown in 1760.

The collection includes a letter written by John Nelson, in Boston, to his wife, Hope, in Middleborough, in April 1779. John writes, in part, "This may inform that I have proposed selling my oldest oxen to Capt. Anthony for the some [*sic*] of one hundred & twenty nine pounds if he should like them at the price you will let him have them & receive the money if that should be the case."

Dennis also donated an undated petition with signatures of 49 Boston citizens. It reads, "To the President of the United States. The undersigned Citizens of Boston recommend

Mr. J. Vincent Browne of this City to the Office of Navy Agent for Massachusetts. Mr. Browne is a Merchant of integrity, a gentleman of unblemished reputation, of great political and moral worth, and one whom we deem peculiarly qualified to discharge the duties of this office." Research revealed that J. Vincent Browne was Joseph Vincent Browne (1803–1868), appointed to the office of Navy Agent by President John Tyler in 1841. Thus, this petition probably dates from 1841 or shortly before.

The signers of the petition include many notable members of Boston society, such as Rufus Choate (1799–1859), U.S. congressman and senator; Theophilus Parsons (1797–1882), Harvard Law School professor; Enoch Train (1801–1868), merchant and ship owner; Samuel Appleton (1766–1853), merchant and philanthropist; and a

Robert G. Shaw, whom we believe to be Robert Gould Shaw (1776–1853), grandfather of the Civil War colonel and hero Robert Gould Shaw.

Many or all of the documents in this collection may be previously unknown to researchers of Revolutionary and Massachusetts history. Thanks to the generosity of Dennis Shapiro, they can now be viewed and used to shed light on people and events of the past. We look forward to researching them further, cataloging them, and making them available online in our digital collections. ♦