



Duty and Disaster: Records Management and the Burning of Kingston

A Sampler of English Colonial Records Saved from the Burning of Kingston

“...I will justly faithfully & honestly preserve and keep All the Records Minits Papers and Writings of what kind so ever that doth belong to either or every of the said Offices that have or that hereafter come into my Hands & Possession; And the same and all and every of them will deliver & yield up to the said George Clinton, when he shall require the same of me. So help me God.”

*Christopher Tappen
July 19, 1765*

With these words from his oath of office, Christopher Tappen became the Deputy Clerk of the County of Ulster. Born in Kingston in 1742, Christopher Tappen served as Deputy Clerk from 1765 to 1812, under George Clinton, and after Clinton's death, as County Clerk until 1821. The words of his oath foreshadow his role as keeper of the records during the tumultuous political events of the American Revolution. The Fourth Provincial Congress, then New York's only government, adopted the State's first constitution at Kingston on April 20, 1777, establishing the town in British eyes, as a hotbed of revolution and therefore worthy of attack. A Committee of Safety passed several resolutions on October 10, 1777, to prepare for the assault. One resolution directed Christopher Tappen and others to remove the public records of the colony to the Town of Rochester for their safety. On October 12, 1777, four days before Kingston was burned, ten wagons filled with the records of the Kingston Council of Safety, the papers of the Receiver General, all the State records, all the Ulster County records, some Albany County records, and the records of the Dutch Church at Kingston, were carried away to Rochester.

Certainly the Dutch and English colonial records in the historical collection of the County Clerk were spared from ruin by the heroic actions of the Committee of Safety and Deputy County Clerk, Christopher Tappen. These records alone bear witness to the colonial history of the county, and therefore, deserve recognition.

Albert Spada
Ulster County Clerk

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On October 16 the British arrived, meeting little or no resistance, burned the city, and retreated, word having arrived that Burgoyne had been defeated at Saratoga. The first Legislature of the State had been in session at Kingston since September 9-10, 1777, but adjourned on October 7 and did not formally convene again until the following January at Poughkeepsie. The records remained at the Town of Rochester until February 1778, when they were brought down to Marbletown, where the Ulster County records were presumably separated from the others and returned to Kingston, while the State records were sent to Poughkeepsie, the new capital.

From Transcriptions of Early County Records of New York State, Prepared by the New York State Historical Records Survey Project and The Work Projects Administration (Albany New York: The Historical Records Survey: 1939)

The citizens of Kingston, after the burning of their homes, together with their outbuildings, in which were stored the gatherings of their harvest and their other crops, were, of course, put to very great straits in regard to all the comforts of life. Without a shelter, except such as might be afforded temporarily through the compassion and hospitality of friends, many built huts and temporary abodes with the materials they could gather. As the buildings originally were principally of stone, and many of them with kitchen additions projecting out in the rear, some were able to finish that part off with temporary roofs, so as to make them, to some extent, comfortable for the winter, others made temporary additions or lean-tos against the standing walls, and a few made temporary covers or huts in the best way they could for shelter, making preparations for the restoration of their buildings the following spring and summer.

From Marius Schoonmaker, History of Kingston New York (New York: Burr Printing House, 1888)

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This exhibition presents images of some of the English colonial records from the historic 101 Box Collection of the Ulster County Clerk. The exhibit was originally held at the Loughran House of the Senate House Historic Site in Kingston New York. It was presented on the occasion of the third re-enactment of the burning of Kingston and Archives Week in New York State in October of 2000.

Several historical accounts of the events leading up to the British attack of October 16, 1777, mention the removal of public records to the town of Rochester for their safety and the role Christopher Tappen, Deputy County Clerk and others played in their removal. One can reasonably assume that the very existence of these records today is a direct result of those heroic acts. The Ulster County Clerk and the Ulster County Records Management Program take great pleasure in sponsoring this exhibit to honor the role Christopher Tappen played in protecting these records; to illustrate the County Clerk's role in protecting public records; and to educate the public about colonial life, our program in general, and the valuable historical information that Ulster County archival records contain.

In deciding which records to choose, the date was obviously my first consideration. I also focused on records related to the towns the records passed through on route: Hurley; Marbletown; Rochester; and Kingston, itself. In addition, I looked for references to the King of England, the free and independent State of New York, and records that revealed the names and occupations of residents, as in the Grand Jury List from the Court of General Sessions. The facsimiles shown in the original exhibit were printed on Canson paper with a Hewlett Packard 2500C color printer from files created by digital photographs taken by John Lenz. Those files and their corresponding transcripts are presented here in this online exhibit.

Ken Gray
Archivist