



NYSFHC Session Syllabus

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Decoding the Ancient Documents: Research in the Dutchess County Court Records Syllabus

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Introduction: What are the Ancient Documents?

The Dutchess County Ancient Documents Collection contains the surviving filings of the county courts from their inception in 1721 until 1889, when the court system began transitioning to its modern form. For most of these decades, two courts operated on the county level: the Quarter Sessions and the Common Pleas. Material from both courts are intermixed within the Ancient Documents Collection. However, if you examine the court minutes (which are available on microfilm), you will find that each court met separately and maintained a separate set of minutes. These minutes are formally titled “Clerk’s Minutes” and are available on microfilm at the Dutchess County Clerk’s Office at 22 Market Street, Poughkeepsie, NY. In contrast to the official court minutes, which provide tidy lists of cases and actions, the contents of the Ancient Documents Collection include a variety of court filings, accompanied by a miscellany of other material. For example, one can find recognizances from the Court of General Sessions adjacent to a plea from the Court of Common Pleas alongside a list of municipal officers.

As of June 2020, the Dutchess County Ancient Documents Project has indexed and imaged 117,000 pages of material. The Ancient Documents Search Portal grants access to 56,987 pages of this material. After documents are digitized, both the images and the metadata are reviewed by County Clerk staff before being uploaded to the search portal. Due to the constant pressure to process material for the next phase of work, the metadata review has always lagged. For research-focused commentary on the Ancient Documents Collection, please visit the Dutchess History Blog at www.dutchesshistory.org. The material currently online covers the range of 1721 through the 1830s.

Generous funding from the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund of the New York State Archives has made this project possible since 2013.

Searching the Collection

To access the Ancient Documents Search Portal, one can either begin at the landing page at www.dutchessny.gov/ancientdocuments or go directly to the search application at

<https://www.dutchessny.gov/DutchessCountyPublicAccess/HistoricalDocuments/HistoricalDocuments.aspx>

Name Search Method 1: the Search Portal

The first method for searching involves simply entering a query in any of the listed fields and hitting the “search” button at the bottom. A list of results will appear beneath that button. Bear in mind that because of limitations in the software package that Dutchess County uses, you may see the same document listed multiple times. For example, if you search for “20” in the document number field, you’ll receive a result for every document that has “20” in its number. And if there are multiple individuals named in that document, you’ll receive a hit for each of their names. So Ancient Document 820 is listed twice, once for Dirch Van Tessel (the defendant) and again for Robert Graham (the plaintiff). The software won’t let us clean that up.

Likewise, there is no browse function.

To view the scanned pages, click the blue-hyperlinked document number in the search results.

One of the issues with the current Ancient Documents Project is that work has been conducted so quickly that we haven’t been able to enter name data for every single document. There are thousands of documents that do not have a name currently attached to them. In those cases, use the MacCracken Index.

Search Method 2: the MacCracken Index

The MacCracken Index volumes are scanned, online, and available at the search portal page: you’ll see them as hyperlinks at the top of the search portal interface.

Click on either of those links to open Volume 1 or Volume 2 of the index as a full word-searchable pdf file. Because these pdf files are so large, it can take a little time for your computer to render them and to conduct the search function. If you don’t want to wait, you can scroll through them just like you would in person. Find the name you are searching for, write down the document number, then go back to the main search interface, type that number in, and hit the search button.

Alternatives to Name Searches

The Ancient Documents Search Portal enables researchers to examine the digitized collection through a variety of criteria in addition to names: one can search by location (the “city” field),

record type, offense, and year. These searches are all helpful if you have a time period, location, or type of crime, but not the name of the individual that goes with it.

Hyperlinks below the Record Type and Offense categories will take a user to a list of those record types and offenses. In addition, if you are searching by a record type or offense that the system recognizes, it will suggest search terms for you in those fields.

Changing Place Names

The location search includes everything from colonial precincts to town boundaries circa 1830. When searching by location, it is therefore important to bear in mind what the location in which you are interested was called during the period of time in which you are interested. Here are the precincts and modern correlations around the Revolutionary Era.

<u>Circa 1770 Precinct</u>	<u>Modern Towns</u>
Rhinebeck Precinct:	Rhinebeck, Red Hook
Charlotte Precinct:	Hyde Park, Clinton, Stanford, Washington, Pleasant Valley
Poughkeepsie Precinct:	Town and City of Poughkeepsie
Rombout Precinct:	Fishkill, East Fishkill, Wappinger, Wappingers Falls, Beacon
Beekman Precinct:	LaGrange, Union Vale, Beekman
Pawling Precinct:	Pawling, Dover
Amenia Precinct:	Amenia
North East Precinct:	North East, Pine Plains, Milan

Prior to 1762, Charlotte and Amenia Precincts were combined within Crum Elbow Precinct. This was the same area covered by the Great Nine Partners patent. The Little Nine Partners Patent covered North East Precinct. The current town of North East includes territory that was originally part of Amenia.

Helpful Record Types

If you can't locate the information you want through a name search, check out these document types for the era/place in which you are interested:

Recognizances: These were the bail bonds of their day, sworn out before justices of the peace to insure that an individual appeared at the next session of the county court in Poughkeepsie. Justices swore out recognizances for offenses ranging from harassment to fathering bastard children. In these documents, you will find the names and location of all the people involved in a case and some description of the offense.

Declarations/Narrations: The starting point for most civil (debt) prosecution, in which the plaintiff sets out the “facts” of the case. Tells you the names of all of the actors and sets out the plaintiff’s version of events.

Affidavits: Sworn statements, ranging from reports by servers that documentation has been delivered to a specific party to pledges of loyalty to the United States (during and after the Revolution) to evidence given in cases. Lots of names and details of incidents. These are sometimes labeled as “depositions.”

Judgement Roll/Judgment Record: a document that sets out an entire debt case from beginning to end, starting off with the declaration or narrative from the plaintiff and ending with the court’s ruling. The closest one comes to a complete case in one document.

Insolvent Debtor material: A variety of document types ranging from inventories of estates and debts to oaths of creditors affirming that they have not been paid. These packets of material can tell you a great deal about the debtors themselves, including their trade, where they lived, what they owned, and who they knew.

Overseers of the Poor material: Ranging from reports to orders for removal, material relating to the Overseers of the Poor is vital for gaining an understanding of how poor law operated and for tracking the life experiences of individuals who might otherwise be lost to history.

Road Commissioner Reports: The next best thing to having a map for charting out where people were located. Every precinct/town prior to the Civil War had road commissioners, whose responsibility was to lay out new roads and maintain existing ones in their community. By searching “controversy over roads,” you will find prosecutions for private landowners building fences and felling trees across roads.

For all questions relating to the Ancient Documents Collection, contact Dutchess County Historian William P. Tatum III, Ph.D., by email at wtatum@dutchessny.gov or via phone at 845-486-2381.