



Book Notes

A fortnightly publication of the JRBS

Vol. 1, No. 15

January 1-15 [holiday break]

January 16-31, 2021

Dear Fellow Bibliophile:

NB: I would like to mention our new [publications page](#) on the JRBS website, which so far contains PDFs of the booklets we published for our 10th and 25th anniversaries, as well as an archive of *Book Notes*. Thanks to Jordan Goffin for continuing to maintain the website!



The Eclectic Collections of Frederick S. Peck (part 1)

Frederick Stanhope Peck (1868–1947) was a wealthy, pedigreed, and powerful figure in Rhode Island. Engaged primarily in manufacturing and banking in his early working life, he later served as the State Finance Commissioner (1926-35) and was for many years the leader of the Republican Party. He was also a collector of historical manuscripts and rare books. In 1944 he would begin dispersing his manuscripts and printed items—his gifts were mostly to the Rhode Island Historical Society, the John Carter Brown Library, and the John Hay Library. The sales of his collection after his death in 1947 included the four folios of Shakespeare, manuscripts written by U.S. presidents and signers of the Declaration of Independence, early English high-spot broadsides, and manuscripts by English literary and political figures.

The Peck family traces itself back to (among others) Joseph and Robert Peck, brothers who arrived in Hingham, Massachusetts in 1638; Robert soon returned to England, but in 1653 Joseph purchased land from Massasoit (also called Osamequin, sometimes spelled Ousamequin or Ossamequin) in what is now Barrington, and his son Nathaniel settled there, naming it Osamequin Farm. The family's business dynasty began with

Frederick's grandfather, Asa Peck (1812-1890), who organized the wool-waste selling firm of Asa Peck & Co. on Canal Street in Providence. His son Leander Remington Peck (1848-1909) began working with Asa in 1866, and Leander's son Frederick joined the company as an office boy in 1885.

In 1905, Frederick bought property abutting the family farm and build Belton Court, a 50,000 square foot mansion named after the village in North Lincolnshire from which the Pecks originated. Significantly expanded in 1928, after it was sold in 1945 its owners included Barrington College (a Christian school), and then Zion Bible College until 2008. In 1978 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. It remains one of Rhode Island's most interesting abandoned structures, and includes the largest undeveloped parcel of land in Barrington.

Peck apparently became interested in collecting in his early 30s when he discovered a parcel of family papers in an old pillowcase hanging from the attic rafters of the oldest house on the family farm. The old land records and other documents inspired him to trace his genealogy, and he claimed ancestral connections to such figures as Geoffrey Chaucer, William the Conqueror and Charlemagne. His library grew to over 8,000 books, and he also collected paintings, Phoenician and Roman glass, and Native American artifacts.

According to one news story he chose 50 valuable books from his collection and gave them to the John Hay Library to sell when the market was "right" to fund acquisitions that the library needed (at that time the Hay was the main library for students), and was a founding member of the [Friends of the Library](#). He gave the library a collection on Mormons, another on western Americana, and collections of autograph letters of Brown presidents Wayland and Manning, the Medici family, and Simón Bolívar.

The Rhode Island Historical Society received several [Roger Williams letters](#), as well as hundreds of other manuscripts related to figures like Nathanael Greene and John Brown—comprising 16 archive boxes in the Robinson Research Center, all calendared in the card catalog (I may expound on this collection in a later issue). He also gave money to catalog the collection—a gift which assures the donor a shower of blessings from librarians!

According to the John Carter Brown Library's *Annual Report* for 1943, Peck gave a "collection of 114 pamphlets and broadsides related to the early years of the revolt of the colonies as it took form in Rhode Island and New York." Lawrence Wroth devoted a full 10 pages of the report to describing the nature and importance of these materials.

I will cover the sale of his collections in detail in subsequent issues.

Rick Ring, President
The John Russell Bartlett Society
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