

Guide to the Gabriel Furman papers, 1725-1913

ARC.190

Finding aid prepared by Woody Woodruff and Larry Weimer

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Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Brooklyn Historical Society

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Summary Information

Repository	Brooklyn Historical Society
Creator	Furman, Gabriel, 1800-1854
Title	Gabriel Furman papers
Date [bulk]	Bulk, 1816-1854
Date [inclusive]	1725-1913
Extent	2.8 Linear feet in seven manuscript boxes
Language	English
Language of Materials	Materials in English.
Abstract	<p>Gabriel Furman (1800-1854) was a lawyer, Whig politician, New York State senator, and historian of early Brooklyn, New York, known for his <i>Notes Geographical and Historical, Relating to the Town of Brooklyn, on Long-Island</i> (1824). The Furman papers principally include thirteen journals dating from circa 1816 to circa 1854 in which Furman both documented his personal observations about Brooklyn and New York and recorded historical items relevant to his writing and lectures. Among the wide diversity of topics found in the journals are epidemics of cholera and yellow fever, financial crises, daily weather conditions, theatre and the arts, politics, and religious belief. The collection also holds Furman manuscript histories, notably one on theatre in New York. Finally, the collection includes several pages from a Furman letter book, principally from 1824, and a page of his legal drafts from 1823. The bulk of the correspondence consists of letters written by Furman to his father, William, who was a New York State assemblyman away at Albany. The principal subjects of these letters concerned local perspectives on</p>

matters that would be taken up by the legislature, including Brooklyn's effort to gain a charter for a proposed Long Island Bank, the proposed act of incorporation for Brooklyn, and Furman's opposition to a proposed expansion of capital punishment in New York. Local electoral politics is also a subject of the correspondence.

Preferred Citation

Identification of item, date (if known); Gabriel Furman papers, ARC.190, Box and Folder number; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Biographical/Historical note

Gabriel Furman (January 23, 1800-November 11, 1854) was -- and remains -- a respected historian of early Brooklyn. His *Notes Geographical and Historical, Relating to the Town of Brooklyn, on Long-Island* (1824) is available today in a recent reprint as well as on line. His *Antiquities of Long Island* and his edition of Daniel Denton's *A Brief Description Of New York, Formerly Called New Netherlands, With The Places Thereunto Adjoining* have also been recently reprinted.

Little is known of Furman's youth; he attended Columbia Academy in Bergen (now part of Jersey City), New Jersey, from 1814-1816. Professionally, Furman became a lawyer, having studied law beginning in 1823 in the office of Elisha W. King of Beekman St., New York. Furman was later a justice of the Brooklyn municipal court, a member of the New York State Senate (1839-1842), and an unsuccessful Whig candidate for lieutenant governor.

Furman's notes, memoranda and journals add a little humanity to the dry facts of his life: He lived at 103 Willow Street, Brooklyn, and was particularly fond of his garden and the birds it attracted. He loved nature, especially trees, birds and nature walks, many of which he took in Hoboken and described in practically lyrical detail. He loved books and was an avid collector. He disliked Andrew Jackson, the "democratical" party, the Loco Focos, Tammany Hall, abolitionists, the troublesome lower classes and immigrants in general. He was strongly if conventionally religious, and in his journals frequently thanked the Almighty for His mercy or prayed for the Almighty to ameliorate some situation.

Furman's journals mention no romantic connections, memorable social events or close friends. In 1832, he developed an opium addiction, lost interest in his career, and began a descent into poverty. Although he remained active through much of the 1840s as a historian and lecturer, Furman was financially ruined by the late 1840s. He died in 1854 in the Brooklyn City hospital and was buried at Green-Wood Cemetery.

(Sources: A brief biographical note can be found on-line at <http://famousamericans.net/gabrielfurman/>. Biographical sketches from 1865 can be found on-line at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=libraryscience>. A fuller biographical essay can be found in the BHS library: Clark, Stephen. "Gabriel Furman: Brooklyn's First Historian" in *The Journal of Long Island History*, v. 10, n. 1 (Autumn 1973), pages 21-32.)

Scope and Contents

The Gabriel Furman papers consist primarily of several volumes of Furman's *Notes and Memoranda*, of which the earliest in the collection were also called common place books. These journals span a period from October 28, 1815, when Furman was 15 years old, to September 10, 1854, two months before he died. However, pages are not consistently arranged chronologically, and many entries are

undated. Furman was an avid -- perhaps even compulsive -- collector of information on a vast range of topics. Perhaps 75% of his *Notes and Memoranda* consists of information copied from other sources, rather than his own observations. He noted Dutch colonial laws of New York, ancient proclamations of Parliament, census figures, commerce data, weather reports from around the world, American Indian culture, observations of sea serpents, arguments that the center of the earth could be reached by ship from the North Pole, references to Shakespeare and the arts, and a host of other unrelated topics. These entries range from a line or two to dozens of pages. They are a mix of transcriptions, summaries, bibliographic references, and commentary.

Furman's personal observations include childhood memories of early Brooklyn and street scenes and local color from his walks around Manhattan, Brooklyn and Hoboken. He also noted natural events, such as the appearance of the Aurora Borealis (multiple times) and infestations of black ants and caterpillars. He extensively covers two important historical events: the cholera epidemic of 1832 and the financial panic of 1837. He occasionally comments on contemporary politics, including some reference to the issues of slavery and abolition, but this is not a significant portion of the journals. The highlights of each journal are as follows:

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 2 (Common Place Book, Vol. 2): circa 1815-circa 1823. Diary while at Columbia Academy (Bergen, New Jersey), 1815-16; lists of political appointees and debates; description and history of the Town of Brooklyn; victims of yellow fever epidemic; chronology of Brooklyn events; prices of numerous commodities.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 3 (Common Place Book, Vols. 3 and 4): (One volume, with Volume 3 beginning after page 128.) circa 1815-circa 1825, with addenda as late as 1845. Notes on old Brooklyn; yellow fever epidemic; partial index by Furman; a Brooklyn man's monopoly on strawberries.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 4: circa 1824-circa 1835. Assorted historical notes; excerpts from New York archives (1674-1737); statistics, poems, stories and anecdotes; Furman's warning (proved correct in the panic of 1837) about the dangers of speculating in Western land; Furman's disapproval of government meddling with currency.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 5: 1725, circa 1827-circa 1845. Appears to include an original 1725 document concerning tythes. Subjects include the law, from Dutch New York onward; books, antiquities and natural phenomena; notion that the earth may be hollow and that you can get to the center of it from the North Pole; a brief diary, 1827-1829.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 6: circa 1831-circa 1832, 1842. Index; list of cures; Furman's faith in Divine Providence; eloquent nature descriptions; cholera epidemic of 1832; Furman trip to Albany, 1832.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 7: circa 1832-circa 1840. Cholera epidemic of 1832 (continued from Volume 6); personal journal for 1833 and 1834; portents and omens of a world Furman considers seriously out of order; lower class troublemakers and rabble rousers; financial crisis of 1837; Furman's experience as a state senator, 1840; New York street scenes.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 8: circa 1840, with entries from 1829 and 1836. Notes from other sources, on books, census figures, commerce, ancient Egypt, superstitions and American antiquities.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 9: circa 1824-circa 1843. Notes from other sources on history, law, natural phenomena and the like; notes on Revolutionary era Brooklyn, from Furman's interviews with his father

and others; an extensive paper on phallic worship that Furman presented to the Ethnological Society of New York.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 10: circa 1834-circa 1845. Primarily notes from Furman's historical research on a variety of topics; Furman's views on abolitionists and slavery; how he would really like to live his life; personal journal entries covering the winter of 1835 and all of 1836.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 12: circa 1828-circa 1842. Miscellaneous notes on history, law, superstitions, antiquities, books; long series of notes on different North and South American Indian antiquities; extensive early account of the death of Meriwether Lewis; journal of a trip to Canandaigua, Niagara Falls and Buffalo.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 15: circa 1841-circa 1847. Long excerpts from Dutch records of New Amsterdam and Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary laws of New York; miscellaneous historical notes; journal of a visit to the Tuscarora Indian reservation, Niagara Falls and Buffalo. Entries end at page 251, and the volume finishes with several hundred blank pages.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 16: circa 1841-circa 1842. Notes on climate change, superstitions, history; multiple entries on Dutch New Amsterdam; Furman's proposed introduction to *Natural History of New York* concerning book printing in New York and a signed letter (1842) from Governor William H. Seward tipped in after page 48; long excerpt from a description of explorations in the South Sea by the USS Peacock. The volume includes numerous blank pages, both interspersed with entries and at the end.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 17: This journal has only blank pages.

Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 18: There are no entries from Furman in this journal and the bulk consists of only blank pages. The journal has entries of 1862-1863 from William Smith Pelletreau indicating that Southampton town records of 1640 to 1660 would be transcribed in the journal. Aside from one partial entry, no such transcriptions are present.

Miscellanies (No volume number): 1854. Weather reports for each day. A lecture by Henry Ward Beecher that Furman says changed his attitude toward abolition; early Brooklyn; profiles of early residents; cholera; fires in various cities.

Notes and Memoranda Vols. 1, 11, 13, and 14: These are not in the collection and are not known to exist.

In addition to the *Notes and Memoranda* volumes, the collection includes both a manuscript outline or draft and a published version of Furman's *Notes, Geographical and Historical, Relating to the Town of Brooklyn, on Long-Island*. Other manuscripts include Furman's *Ancient Chronology of New York From First Discovery to 1799* (1822), *A Sketch of the History of Theatres in the United States* (circa 1828), and a transcription of Jeremiah Johnson's translation of *Vanderdonck's New Netherlands*. The *Ancient Chronology* manuscript is written on pages of an account book, possibly of one John Tyler, with entries dated 1778-1781.

Finally, the collection includes several pages from a Furman letter book, principally from 1824, and a page of his legal drafts from 1823. The bulk of the correspondence consists of letters written by Furman to his father, William, who was a New York State Assemblyman away at Albany. The principal subjects of these letters concerned local perspectives on matters that would be taken up by the legislature,

including Brooklyn's effort to gain a charter for a proposed Long Island Bank, the proposed act of incorporation for Brooklyn, and Furman's opposition to a proposed expansion of capital punishment in New York. Local electoral politics is also a subject of the correspondence. Among the Brooklynites mentioned in the correspondence are Alden Spooner, Leffert Lefferts, and Joseph Sprague. The three legal drafts concern breach of marriage contract, sexual assault, and trespass.

Arrangement note

Furman's journals (the volumes of *Notes and Memoranda* and *Miscellanies*) are followed by his manuscript and published histories, which are followed by pages from his letter book and book of legal drafts.

For the journals, the date range used in the container list below is based on the dates Furman made the entries to the journals, not to the dates of any historical items transcribed or summarized by Furman (e.g., a date range for a journal with transcriptions or other reference to colonial laws of the 1600s and 1700s will have a nineteenth century date range, not one reflecting the earlier centuries).

Administrative Information

Publication Information

Brooklyn Historical Society 2011

Conditions Governing Access

Open to researchers without restriction.

Conditions Governing Use note

Materials in this collection are in the public domain.

Immediate Source of Acquisition note

The Furman papers were acquired over time from various sources. Perhaps the earliest acquisition was the published version of *Notes Geographical and Historical*, received from Henry Stiles in 1863. The *Ancient Chronology of New York* manuscript was acquired from Henry C. Murphy in 1865.

The manuscript *Sketch of the History of Theatres/Vanderdonck's New Netherlands* and the journal *Miscellanies* were purchased in 1895-1896 from a Furman descendant, Samuel Hand Furman.

Volume 17 of the *Notes and Memoranda* was acquired from J. Carson Brevoort. The provenance of the other volumes of *Notes and Memoranda* and the letter book and legal draft pages has not been traced, as of 2010. There is some indication that these were acquired together at auction, prior to 1893.

Processing Information note

The Furman journals were described and indexed by BHS volunteer Woody Woodruff based on his reading of them in 2010. The overall arrangement of the Furman papers and additional description for all content was done by project archivist Larry Weimer in January 2011.

The collection combines three accessions: 1973.257, 1974.113, 1974.116.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

At Brooklyn Historical Society:

BHS holds typescripts prepared sometime in the twentieth century of another Gabriel Furman journal, one that may no longer be extant. The journal entries date 1821-1823. See the collection titled "Typescripts of Gabriel Furman's notes on Brooklyn, N.Y., 1821-1823," call number ARC.229.

An unattributed selection of typescript entries from Furman's Volumes 2, 3, and 4 can be found in the BHS library at call number F129.B7.F87.1953.

Correspondence from Gabriel Furman can be found in ARC.118, the Isaac and Silas Ludlam papers.

A search in BHS's on-line catalog, Bobcat, on "Gabriel Furman" will identify several items by or about Furman. Among these is a dissertation proposal by Ronald Leri which includes a bibliography on Furman and his circle and times.

Other than BHS:

A search of Worldcat on "Gabriel Furman" will identify many items. Perhaps the most notable are the following:

The East Hampton Public Library's Long Island Collection holds an 8 page journal kept by Furman while at Columbia Academy, November 11-16, 1816. The library also has the *Biographical Sketch of Gabriel Furman* produced by the Faust Club in 1865. This is available on-line at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1031&context=libraryscience>.

Pennsylvania State University (University Park campus) holds a manuscript version different from that held by BHS of Furman's *A Sketch of the History of Theatres in the United States* (circa 1828).

New York Public Library holds the catalog of Furman's books sold at auction in 1846.

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- Long Island Bank.

Genre(s)

- commonplace books
- diaries
- Histories
- Letter books
- natural history

Geographic Name(s)

- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Buildings, structures, etc.
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Climate
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Commerce
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Description and travel
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Economic conditions
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x History
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x History |v Archival resources.
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Politics and government
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Religious life and customs
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Social conditions
- Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) |x Social life and customs
- New York (N.Y.) |x History
- New York (State) |x History

Personal Name(s)

- Furman, Gabriel, 1800-1854
- Furman, Gabriel, 1800-1854 -- Diaries

Subject(s)

- Cholera |z New York (State) |z Kings County
- Theaters |z New York (State) |z New York |x History
- Yellow fever |z New York (State) |z Kings County

Other Finding Aids note

Subject indexes for all the Furman journals were prepared in 2010 by Brooklyn Historical Society volunteer Woody Woodruff. These indexes are available in PDF via the Emma catablog on BHS's website and from the BHS library.

Collection Inventory

	Dates	Box	Folder
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 2 (Common Place Book, Vol. 2)</i>	circa 1815- circa 1823	1	1
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 3 (Common Place Book, Vols. 3 and 4)</i>	circa 1815- circa 1845	1	2
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 4</i>	circa 1824- circa 1835	1	3
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 5</i>	1725, circa 1827- circa 1845	2	1
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 6</i>	circa 1831-circa 1832, 1842	2	2

Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol 7</i>	circa 1831- circa 1840	2	3
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 8</i>	circa 1829- circa 1840	3	1
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 9</i>	circa 1824- circa 1843	3	2
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 10</i>	circa 1834- circa 1845	4	1
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 12</i>	circa 1828- circa 1842	3	3
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 15</i>	circa 1841- circa 1847	4	2

Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 16</i>	circa 1841- circa 1842	5	1
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 17 (blank)</i>	undated	5	2
Journal: <i>Notes and Memoranda, Vol. 18</i>	1862	6	1
Journal: <i>Miscellanies</i>	1854	6	2
Manuscript: <i>Ancient Chronology of New York From First Discovery [1492] to 1799</i>	1778-1781, 1821-1822	7	1
Content note			
The item is an account book with entries dating from 1778-1781. Furman used the book's blank spaces and pages as a scrapbook with clippings from 1821 and for his 1822 Chronology manuscript.			
Manuscript: <i>Notes Geographical and Historical Relating to the Town of Brooklyn in Kings County on Long Island</i>	circa 1824	7	2

<i>Notes Geographical and Historical Relating to the Town of Brooklyn in Kings County on Long Island</i>	1824	6	3
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<i>Manuscripts: A Sketch of the History of Theatres in the United States; Vanderdonck's New Netherlands</i>	circa 1828-1913	6	4
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Content note

The item includes two Furman manuscripts from circa 1828 and circa 1832. Later dated material in the item relate to the acquisition of the item by the Brooklyn (then Long Island) Historical Society.

Letter Book Pages	1823-1825	6	5
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Legal Drafts	1823	6	6
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