

**James Johns (1797-1874)  
Papers, 1823-1873  
MSA 61, 61A and 61B, MS Size D**

## **Introduction**

This collection consists of the correspondence, diaries, stories, poetry, and pen printed newspapers of James Johns (1792-1874) of Huntington and Starksborough, Vermont. Johns was a prolific writer and chronicler of local history. He is best known for his pen printing, a style of careful handwriting that resembles mechanical printing.

Dorman B. E. Kent acquired these papers from Charles E. Tuttle and gave them to the Vermont Historical Society in 1920. In 1957 additional items, largely Johns poetry, were acquired from the bequest of Harold G. Rugg.

A small group of material that was used in a VHS exhibit (exhibit date?) and whose provenance is unclear have been integrated into the papers. See folders 0.1 and 0.2 for photocopies of title pages and captions for the exhibit items and items from the Rugg bequest. The papers are stored in three archival flip-top boxes and occupy 1 linear foot of shelf space.

## **Biography**

James Johns (September 26, 1797- April 26, 1874) was the son of Jehiel (February 19, 1756-August 12, 1840) and Elizabeth Sexton (d. March 25, 1851) Johns, first settlers of Huntington, Vermont, in 1786. Jehiel Johns served successfully as moderator, town clerk, selectman, treasurer, and finally for three years, as Huntington's representative in the Vermont legislature.

James Johns, one of six children, had little opportunity for more than a district school education. He farmed in Huntington until 1868 when he moved to Starksborough where he died in 1874. He began writing at age thirteen. His early literary output included stories, poetry, essays, song lyrics, a "Journal of the Weather," and diaries he called "minutes" or "yearly chronicles." Johns' first published work was a collection of poems, *Green Mountain Muse*. It was printed in Burlington by Foote and Stacy in 1828.

In 1857, according to Robert W.G. Vail, "James Johns, Vermont Pen Printer" (*Bibliographical Society of America Papers*, v. 27, 1933, pp. 89-132) (VHS B J623), Johns "secured from Boston a small hand press and became his own publisher." He published several small books but abandoned the press by the 1860's in favor of printing by hand.

Johns' early pen printed work includes the newspaper, *The Vermont Autograph and Remarker*, which he wrote and distributed from as early as 1834 until 1873. He produced the final issue of the paper on August 28, 1873, eight months before his death at

age seventy-six. Johns' pen printed output consisted of obituary, poetry, short stories, essays, sermons, speeches, and local history.

As a student of local history Johns recorded local events in his diaries. In 1867, his history of Huntington, Vermont, was published in Hemingway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (VHS R 974.30 H37, v. 1, pp. 812-829).

In addition to Robert W.G. Vail's biography of Johns, W.S. Rann, *History of Chittenden County*, 1886 p.75-6 (VHS XR 974.30 C 449r) includes an article on Johns' newspaper publishing activities. Johns' pen printed genealogical chart of his immediate family is located in the VHS MS Size D.

### Scope and Content

James Johns, a Huntington, Vermont, farmer, wrote prolifically and distributed his work in several formats: pen printing, letter press printing, or hand writing. The collection of James Johns materials at the Vermont Historical Society is reported to be the largest collection of Johns' work. The collection includes his weather journals and diaries, letters, short stories, poetry, newspapers, essays, and local history which are either pen printed or hand written. His longer works are often found in hand sewn pamphlets with letter press title pages.

Johns' pen printed output is unique and the pen printed items in the collection are noted on the inventory. The pen printed items include an issue of his newspaper, *Remarker and Independent Review*, Huntington, June 27, 1833, probably a predecessor of the *Vermont Autograph and Remarker*, as well as several short stories, many poems, and local history. Johns' weather journals from 1823-1873 and a collection of approximately 25 of his short stories occupy a substantial part of the collection. Johns' poetry, most of which he wrote to memorialize the deceased, occupies five folders (MS61A: 12-16). Although Johns carried on a lively correspondence the Papers contain only a few of his letters or those from his correspondents (MS61:1).

In 1828 Johns had a book of his poetry published, *The Green Mountain Muse: or Original Poetry on Various Subjects*. According to Vail's bibliography the copy in this collection may be the only copy extant (MS61A:19).

### Related Collections

Material by and about James Johns is scattered in the VHS collections. His name should be checked in the card catalog, automated catalog, the Brigham Index, and the manuscript database.

#### Biographies and works about Johns or his family

1. Vail, Robert W. G. and James Johns, Vermont pen printer (in *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 1933, v.27, pt.2, p. 89-132) VHS B/J623

Vail includes a biography as well as a bibliography of the writings of James Johns. Vail states (p.110) that the University of Vermont and the American Antiquarian Society have small collections of materials.

2. Photocopies of the following manuscripts are located in Folder O:

a) a biography of Johns' short stories reproduced from an original typescript in MSS 21, #72, compiles and date unknown.

b) *Selections from the Library of James Johns* to be sold at public auction at Heartman's in Rutland, Vermont on September 27, 1920.

3. W.S. Rann, ed. *History of Chittenden, Vermont*. Mason, 1886. (XR974.30 C449r) About Jehiel Johns, first settler of Huntington, pp. 615-16, and the *Vermont Autograph and Remarker*, in the history of the press, pp. 275-277.

4. A pen printed genealogical chart fro James Johns' immediate family (MS Size D).

Photocopies of numbers 3 and 4 are located in Folder O.

#### Photographs

Although two ambrotypes of James Johns (VHS FB 25) are both undated, Johns records in his own journal of June 25, 1863, "Had my ambrotype \_\_\_\_\_ likeness taken at Seneca Places , Daguerrotype Saloon in Richmond..." The later photograph of Johns has been reproduced in Olga Hallock's *Huntington, Vermont, 1786-1976*, p.96 (VHS 974.31 H 921h)

According to VHS MSS 21 #72, this photograph may have been a gift to the VHS by Johns' nephew, Norman A. Johns of Huntington.

#### *Vermont Autograph and Remarker and Huntington Remarker*

The library catalog should be consulted for holdings of Johns' pen printed newspaper. The library has scattered holdings between 1840-1873. A photocopy of the June 30, 1856 issue, that is not in aforementioned collection is located in Folder O. The original is in Doc. 346, Folder 25.

#### *Huntington, Vermont History*

1. Johns, James.

Brief sketch or outline of the history of Huntington. 1861 (pen printing) S\*MS090J6Z

2. Johns, James

A brief sketch or outline of the history of the town of Huntington. 1861 Typewritten copy of original pen printed manuscript. MS 974.31 #921j

## 3. Johns, James

A brief record of the various fatal accidents which have happened from the first settlement of the town of Huntington to the present time. 1857  
First book printed in types in Huntington. \*S090J62f

## 4. Same 1858

MS 090J62f

5. Hemenway, Abby, ed. *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*. v.1 pp812-829.

“Typographical and historical report of the town of Huntington, Chittenden County, Vermont.” By James Johns. R974.30 H37 v.1, pt.2

Manuscripts

The VHS manuscript collection is an invaluable source of Johns’ work, but may require persistence to identify the widely spread items. One of the larger miscellaneous collections (MSS 21, #72) includes letters to and from Johns, as well as his poems. Two of Johns’ letters have been photocopied for folder 0; the originals are in Doc. 346, Folder 25 and Mss 21, #7.

Photocopies of Johns’ poetry in Folder 0 include:

- an 1849 pen printed verse (Doc. 30, Folder 36)
- two obituary poems (Julia Ann Johns, 1847 and Nathan Holly, 1863); they typescript originals are located in MSS 26 #75 and #72, respectively.

Several of Johns’ works have been reprinted in the *Vermont Historical Society Proceedings*, n.s. IV, no. 2 1936, pp. 69-102 (Ref. 974.30 V591p, v.4, n.s.):

1. “Minutes” for 1823, 1824, and 1826
2. “A Memorandum of Prominent Occurrences”, 1860 and 1861
3. “Caleb Covet Wife’s Marriage” (a story)
4. “The Catamount Hunt” (poem)

VHS Museum

A wallet with tools for striking a fire that belonged to Jehiel Johns, James Johns’ father, is in the museum collection (35.4.2, storage location TO-1). Jehiel Johns’ powder pouch, (35.4.1), which was part of the same gift to the VHS, is listed as missing in museum records.

**Series Notes**I. Letters

According to Johns' *Memorandum of Papers and Letters Sent and Received*, between 1840 and 1872, he carried on a livid, correspondence (MS61:17); however, there are only a few letters extant either from or to Johns in the collection.

Family letters include an 1850 letter to Johns from his nephew, Henry, from San Francisco and an undated note from Mary Johns (a niece of James Johns???) to her grandmother, Elizabeth. In several business letters to Johns, the writers comment on his newspaper, *The Vermont Autograph and Remarker*.

In an 1873 letter to Justin Morrill, who was serving in the U.S. Senate, Johns enclosed a copy of his newspaper and plied Morrill with questions about Washington politics.

## II. Diaries

In a series of diaries from 1830 to 1873, Johns chronicles the weather, local accidents, births, deaths, and marriages as well as personal events. The diaries, which Johns calls ransously *Weather Journal, Minutes, or Yearly Chronicle*, are handwritten and bound in brown paper, often with a pen printed cover title. The following years are missing from the series: 1824-25, 1827-29, 1831-32, 1837, 1851 and 1854.

## III. Short Stories

Of the approximated twenty-five stories in the collection, only three are pen printed (MS61:18). Many of the stories are bound in paper with pen printed or letter press title pages.

Many of the stories have historical themes. Vail writes: "As Johns left the Green Mountains only once or twice in his life time, his inspiration was entirely local. But he was well informed on the history of his state and read everything he could find to supplement the tales he had learned in his boyhood from the veterans of the Revolution and the War of 1812 who had been his father's neighbors."

## IV. Verse

Although James Johns wrote poems on many different subjects, his greatest output was "obituary verse" in which he memorialized the deceased (MS61A: 12-16). A few poems in this format are pen printed (MS61A:10), and a few he printed on his letter press (MS61A:16).

Johns wrote a number of "acrosticks," or poetry in which each letter of an individual's name is the first letter of each lyric of the poem. There are both pen printed and letter press "actosticks" in the collection (MS61: 10). Johns' earliest published work was a collection of poems entitled *Green Mountain Muse, or original Poetry on Various Subjects*. The \_\_\_ leaf of this 1828 publication has Dorman E. Kent's note "very rare" (MS61: 19).

## V. Essays

Although the collection includes Johns' essays on many subjects both pen printed and hand written, the most notable may be the following three pamphlets from his letter press:

-*Remarkable Circumstances and Interesting Adventures*. 1858

-*The Green Mountain Tradition, or Book of Bears*. 1870 (D.E.B. Kent "rare item")

-*A Brief Record of the Fatal Accidents Which Have Happened in Huntington*. 1872

All of which can be found in MS61B: 3).

## VI. Newspapers

The Johns' papers do not include a collection of Johns' *Autograph and Remarker*, the pen printed newspaper which he produced for forty years. There is, however, a pen printed issue of the *Remarker and Independent Review*, June 27, 1833, Huntington, Vermont, which may have been a fore runner (MS61B: 8). The papers include several issues of the *Starksborough Gazette* for 1871 and 1872 which Johns printed on his letter press (MS61B: 9)

## VII. Political Statistics and History

Johns pen printed annual lists of the members of the Vermont legislature from 1796-1843 and made handwritten copies of votes in the 1840s on various Vermont legislative issues which interested him (MS61B: 10 & 11). He was interested in Huntington, Vermont and former residents (undated) and deaths of residents by year from 1862 to 1866.

## **Organization**

The papers are organized in twelve series:

- I. Letters
- II. Diaries
- III. Fiction
- IV. Verse
- V. Essays
- VI. Sermons and speeches
- VII. Songs
- VIII. Music
- X. Newspapers
- XI. Political Statistics
- IX. Local History
- XII. Miscellaneous

**Inventory**I. Letters

MS 61:1 Letters, 1834-73 and undated

II. Weather journals, minutes, etc.

- 2 Weather journals, minutes, etc., 1823, 1826, 1830
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_, 1833, 1834, 1835
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_, 1836, 1838, 1839
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_, 1840, 1841, 1842
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_, 1843, 1844, 1845
- 7 \_\_\_\_\_, 1846, 1847, 1848
- 8 \_\_\_\_\_, 1849, 1850, 1852
- 9 \_\_\_\_\_, 1853, 1855, 1856
- 10 \_\_\_\_\_, 1857, 1858, 1859
- 11 \_\_\_\_\_, 1860, 1861, 1862
- 12 \_\_\_\_\_, 1863, 1864, 1865
- 13 \_\_\_\_\_, 1866, 1867, 1868
- 14 \_\_\_\_\_, 1869, 1870, 1871
- 15 \_\_\_\_\_, 1872, 1873
- 16 Diary of a trip to NYC, ca. 1850
- 17 Memos on Mail, 1840-72

III. Fiction

- 18 *Caleb Covetwife's Marriage*, undated; *Ezekial Saunders*, 1870; *Ella Northrop*, undated, pen printed
- 19 *Mary Ann*, 1854; rev. 1861; *House by the Woods*, 1864, *Cato*, 1864 and 1869 condensation
- MS 61A:1 *Adventures of a Silver Dollar*, 1867; *Melville and Mary*, 1867; *Adeline*, 1868
- 2 *Ellen Ecksworth*, 1870; *Travels of Robert Risket*, 1870; *Leslie Lamson*, 1871
- 3 *Grover*, 1872; *Margret Macpherson*, 1872
- 4 *Ella Northrop*, 1873; *Isabel*, 1873
- 5 *Adventures of a Walking Cane*; *Arthur Bailey*; *Fanny and Hattie* (undated)
- 6 *Harry Hazard*; *Julia Fitzpatrick*; *Mansion of Cherry Hill*, (undated)
- 7 *Ellsworth*; *Partridge Heywood*; *The Refugees*
- 8 *Sarah Wilson*; *Travels of Peter Peregrine*; *Voyages and Adventures of Jack Nye*, (undated)

IV. Verse

- 9 Poetry, in pen printing 1824 and undated
- 10 Acrosticks in pen printing, hand writing, letter press, 1833-73

- 11 \_\_\_\_\_, Letter press, 1837-1872 and undated  
 12 \_\_\_\_\_, death, in pen printing, 1843-1863 and undated  
 13 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, handwritten 1824, 1849 and 1850s  
 14 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, 1860s-1873  
 15 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, undated  
 16 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, letter press 1846, 1865 and undated  
 17 \_\_\_\_\_, handwritten, mostly undated  
 18 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
 19 *Green Mountain Muse: or original poetry on various subjects*, by James Johns, 1828, printed

#### V. Essays

- MS61A:20 Miscellaneous, pen printing undated  
 MS61B:1 \_\_\_\_\_, handwritten, 1840-1870  
 2 \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, undated  
 3 \_\_\_\_\_, letter press 1850-72

#### VI. Sermons and Speeches

- 4 Sermons (undated) and Speeches, 1846-73

#### VII. Songs

- 5 Songs, pen printing, undated  
 6 Songs 1848 and undated

#### VIII. Music

- 7 Music, pen printing, undated

#### IX. Newspapers

- 8 *Remarker and Independent Review*, Huntington, June 27, 1833, pen printing  
 9 *Starksborough Gazette*, Starksborough, Vermont, September 1871, August 1872, and undated pen printing

#### X. Political Statistics

- 10 Political Statistics, pen printing 1796-1843  
 11 \_\_\_\_\_, 1796-1842

#### XI. Local History

- 12 Lists of residents in Huntington and Hinesburgh etc. pen printing undated

13 \_\_\_\_\_, 1808-71

XII. Miscellaneous

14 Pen printing, 1850-71, and undated

15 Letterpress, undated

16 Miscellaneous, undated