



The Historical  
Society of  
Pennsylvania

Collection 1887

Samuel Breck (1771-1862)  
Papers

1795-1862

1 box, 23 vols., 3 lin. feet

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**Processed by:** Kim Massare

**Processing Completed:** November 2003

**Sponsor:** Processing made possible by a grant from the  
National Endowment for the Humanities

**Restrictions:** None

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### Abstract

Samuel Breck was born on July 17, 1771, in Boston. Of English descent, he was the son of the wealthy and prominent Samuel Breck (1747-1809) and Hannah Andrews (1747-1830), and husband to Jean (Ross) Breck (b. 1773), the daughter of one of Philadelphia's most important merchants. Samuel and Jean had one daughter, Lucy (1807-1828). For thirty-eight years, he and his wife lived at the Sweetbriar Estate just outside of Philadelphia. A merchant by trade, Breck was also elected to the Pennsylvania State House of Representatives, State Senate, and U.S. Congress, and was a dedicated observer of politics during his lifetime. He died in 1862 at the age of ninety-one.

Philanthropist, amateur artist and historian, diligent documentarian, Breck's worldly interests were truly vast and are well preserved. The materials in this collection represent a staggering amount of subject interests and a near-lifetime's worth of documentation, though Breck devoted the bulk of his attention to American and European history and politics, philanthropy, and literature. This collection spans the period of 1795 to 1862 and takes the form of diaries, travel logs, manuscripts, lecture transcripts, notes, and graphics.

### Background note

Samuel Breck was born in Boston on July 17, 1771, to Hannah Andrews and Samuel Breck Sr. His father was a member of the general court representing Boston, a philanthropist, director of the Bank of the United States, and agent to the Royal Army and Navy of France during the Revolutionary War. Samuel had three siblings: Hannah, Lucy, and George. At age eleven, Samuel went abroad to study at the College of Loveze in France where he was instructed by Benedictine monks and became fluent in French. Samuel returned home after four years of study and in 1793 moved to Philadelphia with his family in order to escape Boston's heavy rate of taxation. He married Jean Ross (born September 23, 1773) on December 24, 1795, and with her had one daughter, Lucy, who was born May 1, 1807, and died July 25, 1828, at the age of twenty-one. Coincidentally, Samuel's sister, also named Lucy, died at this same age. The Breck family burial plot is located at Saint Paul's Church at 4<sup>th</sup> and Pine Streets.

Samuel was a merchant by trade. Financially secure, he was also free to be extremely active in politics and philanthropy in Philadelphia. He was a respected politician, serving in the Pennsylvania State House of Representatives from 1817 to 1820, the State Senate from 1832 to 1834, and as a Federalist in the U.S. Congress from 1823 to 1825. He was acquainted with many of the prominent men of his day, including the Marquis de LaFayette, Daniel Webster, and Nicholas Biddle. In 1822, he became president of the Schuylkill Bank. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the American Philosophical Society, the Philadelphia Athenaeum, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Institute for the Instruction of the Blind are all organizations in which Breck was an avid member. He remained active and wrote in his diary until his death in 1862 at the age of ninety-one.

### Scope & content

Samuel Breck's diaries, travel logs, manuscripts, lecture transcripts, letters, notes, and collected graphics, spanning the period of 1795 to 1862, represent a near-lifetime's worth of his opinions, activities, and interests. An all-inclusive list of subjects contained in Breck's writings would be gargantuan, however his primary interests lay in American and European politics and history, philanthropy, and literature. He was often asked to speak before groups on historical topics. Breck was also artistically minded and his drawings and watercolor paintings appear sporadically throughout his diaries and also in a small volume. His work as a merchant is not discussed in his writings. Breck's twelve diaries comprise the bulk of the collection, though there is no documentation for the following years: 1836-1837, 1842-1845, 1858, and 1860-1861.

Samuel Breck anticipated with hope the day that his writings would be perused by future generations: "We love the offsprings of our speech and pen too well to let even the most trifling and ephemeral of them encounter utter forgetfulness... If any good natured, patient relative, should have the courage to run his eye over them, I hope he or she will think kindly of their author." He often wrote with the future reader in mind, making sure to elucidate the details of his life for a potentially unknown audience.

### Overview of arrangement

|            |  |                       |
|------------|--|-----------------------|
| Series I   | Diaries, 1800-1862                                   | 12 volumes            |
| Series II  | Travel logs, 1822 and 1828                           | 2 volumes             |
| Series III | Lectures, Letters, Manuscripts, and Notes, 1795-1852 | 6 volumes & 5 folders |
| Series IV  | Graphics, 1861, n.d.                                 | 3 volumes             |

## Series description

### Series 1. Diaries, 1800-1862

The earliest item in the collection written by Breck is a diary dating from 1800, when the author was twenty-nine years old. In 1862, at the age of ninety-one, Breck was still contributing somewhat regularly to a diary. He stated in his first journal that he wished to improve his writing and he believed that exercising his pen on a daily basis would help him to achieve this. His early entries consist mainly of transcribed and translated pieces of literature or poetry; in his later and more opinionated diary writing, it is evident that he succeeded in his writing exercise and found his own voice. An entry from September 4, 1838, written at age sixty-seven: "Shaking hands is an inconvenient, tho' very prevailing fashion. First the taking off the glove; then the excuse for not being able to get a tight glove from a perspiring hand; then giving or receiving a clammy paw... Better, if you can avoid giving offence, to be hand-in-glove with every one." Another entry from September 25, 1840, written at age sixty-nine: "I have sketched here a print [with my pen] a faint resemblance of the monkey fashion, of the day, among the dandies of Chestnut Street. They are so hideously ugly, that one can scarcely look them in the face, without feeling disgusted. There is no accounting for taste, that is certain." Entries range from several words ("At home, wet day") to several pages. Breck was a faithful diarist, though he confessed to occasionally having to go back and make up for missed entries. Late in life, he wrote only on his birthday and wedding anniversaries, giving thanks to God for his and his wife's health. His prayers of thankfulness grow in length with his increasing age.

Breck was consistently well read on the affairs of the government and its members, European politics, current events, and statistics relating to various civic topics, having allotted time during his day for this purpose: "The systematick manner in which I pass my time and divide the day, admits of a political hour." In August of 1814, he wrote passionately about the effects of the British invasion of Washington: "The disgrace of this expedition will forever attach to the nation...No American can hold his head up after this in Europe or at home, when he reflects that a motley group of French, Spanish, Portuguese and English, amounting only to 4,000 have successfully dared to march 40 miles from their ships, and ruin our best navy yard, invade our capital and march in safety, nay unmolested, back to their vessels. O democracy! what have you brought us to!" Breck enjoyed "[musing] over the direful effects of ambition, hypocrisy, political fanaticism, state-intrigue and all of their concomitant evils..." because "my tranquil and unvaried life furnishes very little matter for diurnal remark; and were I not to note down the interesting publick events of Europe and elsewhere, I should find myself totally at a loss for a topick." His readings were not, however, limited to the factual and historical; Breck's first diary contains a plethora of copied and translated passages of poetry and literature.

Breck was acquainted with several prominent figures of his day and several diary entries provide colorful insight into their personalities. On July 29, 1818, he included a passage from a complimentary letter from Nicholas Biddle, who had just enjoyed reading one of Breck's pamphlets. On March 24, 1827, he spoke with Daniel

Webster, who feared the worst should Andrew Jackson be elected. General Lafayette honored Breck by joining him, along with the General's son, Nicholas Biddle, and a few others, for a dinner party at Sweetbriar on July 24, 1825. Unfortunately, the cook Breck hired in order to remedy the "lamentable deficiency of our common cooks" died the day of the dinner party and at the last moment Breck was forced to find a replacement. In spite of his ability to dine with the elite of his day, Breck refused to believe that he personally was a prominent figure and on August 8, 1818, he declined an invitation for his portrait to be painted and hung in the National Gallery. A letter he copied in his diary states his reasoning: "I have done nothing which could in the remotest way entitle me to it, and because your gallery, devoted as it is to the preservation of the likeness of men of the highest distinction in the nation, should never receive into it those of obscurity or even mediocrity."

Often there are newspaper clippings pasted into the diaries, many of which are Breck's published opinions and speeches delivered while in he was in public office. Prior to being elected to Congress in 1823, Breck wrote a scathing editorial in 1822 in which he chastised members of that body for their "vulgar habit" of wearing hats during session. In an amendment beneath the article, however, he reproached himself for his hastiness: "It is curious enough, that after this tirade against the manners of Congress, being elected myself to that body in 1823 I found it exceedingly convenient to sit with my hat on, and did so almost daily. We must be slow in reproof." A December 1848 diary entry contains several of Breck's speeches that were delivered while in office. Also pertaining to his political work are his comments in his 1821-1833 diary (volume 5) concerning a memorial sent to the state legislature by "the Coloured people of Philadelphia." This passage also makes note of Breck's high esteem for James Forten, the sailmaker and abolitionist Breck referred to as "a black gentleman."

In his diaries, Breck duplicated letters he sent to various people and he often recorded the daily temperature, most consistently in his diary from 1814 to 1827. Brief travel accounts and several drawings and watercolor paintings are also featured. Of special note is a collection of calling cards contained in a November 1829 entry and several entries on curiosities: the Siamese twins Chang & Eng's 1829 visit to Philadelphia; the 1835 visit of Afong Moy, whose bound feet made her a Chinese curiosity; and a April 17, 1847, exhibit of mesmerism. Breck's diary entry on the last topic covered three and a half pages, and though he went as an "unbeliever," in the end he concluded: "In all this very singular exhibition I think I can safely say there was neither collusion nor illusion; but the simple truth alone. How and why this apparently super human performance is allowed, it may not be for our limited understanding to explain."

The 1862 diary, the last in the series, is comprised of excerpts chosen by Breck from his other diaries. Interestingly, he chose to include primarily the writings of other authors and his translations of several authors. In the margins of this book are subject headings. The first page of this diary also contains a photograph of the ninety-one year old author.

Breck's "Broken Journal of a Session in Congress" (1823-1824) is a separate volume that records activities during his term in the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress, including bills and resolutions proposed and conversations and social calls with many prominent members of government. Also contained in this volume are two interesting visual aids: a printed plan of the floor of the House of Representative with each seat labeled with its sitter and a printed diagram with the dimensions of the Capitol building.

Years that are missing diary documentation include: 1836-1837, 1842-1845, 1858, and 1860-1861.

### **Series 2. Travel logs, 1822 and 1828**

Breck's travel logs document two extended trips: one by several boats to Boston in 1822, and the other by coach to Niagara, New York, in 1828. They contain detailed descriptions and impressions of the routes, places traveled, and the locals. The former trip was made with his mother, brother George, and sister Hannah and her husband for the purpose of selling the country estate of a deceased relative. On June 11<sup>th</sup> during this trip, while outside of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Breck encountered a "very extraordinary sect of religious people called shaking Quakers." He noted their peculiar customs and concluded, "This people is another instance of the folly which seizes upon the minds of fanatick associations."

The 1828 trip to Niagara was made with his uncle. While at an annual fair in Lancaster, Breck noticed fashions that he remarked had not yet reached Philadelphia, that of a gentleman taking a lady's arm instead of the reverse, and the novel practice of man and woman walking hand in hand. En route from Middletown to Harrisburg during that same trip, an axle broke and Breck and his uncle stopped at a house to ask "for a little hospitality," which the resident "did not seem at all willing to grant us, hardly deigning to speak to us." They stopped at another house to ask for help "but were not much better received than before." The log for that trip, which is missing several pages, ends for unknown reasons in Buffalo, New York, before the pair reached Niagara.

### **Series 3. Lecture, Letters, Manuscripts, and Notes, 1795-1852**

As an amateur historian, Breck produced quite a few written works on various topics. The volume entitled "Recollections" (started in 1830) is a 263-page historical account of his life, beginning in 1797. It is extremely detailed and is much more than a personal narrative. The number of names mentioned in this volume is immense. "Recollections" ends abruptly without conclusion after a passage about Alexander Hamilton. There are also two other volumes that contain an assortment of manuscripts and written materials, which are bound separately and pasted into the book, ranging from 1795 to 1852. These pieces of writing are mostly transcripts of Breck's speeches on historical topics to various groups.

Two volumes each contain one lecture that Breck read before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: "Whitefield and his times," read February 1850, is a short biography of the Reverend George Whitefield, a respected minister who did much to "promote the spiritual and temporal happiness of the people" in America and Europe; contained in a separate folder are related memoranda and a list of books on and by Whitefield. The second lecture, "Observations by Samuel Breck of Philadelphia, on the life of William Penn, and the progress of Pennsylvania, under the auspices of his Constitution and Laws," was read April 1850. Another volume, "Donations, chiefly testamentary, by Philadelphians, for charitable, literary, educational and other purposes," written in January 1848, is a short history of the founding of Philadelphia with descriptions of charitable acts by Penn, Whitefield, and Franklin. The accompanying notes are contained in a separate folder. Also contained in separate folders are: "A Short Biography of the late Honorable Richard Peters" (1828), "Interesting notices of the life of the Marquis de Lafayette," and some papers, not all written by Breck, relating to the Breck family's genealogy.

**Series 4. Collected graphics, 1861, n.d.**

In Breck's "Illustrations and Clippings," he cut and pasted engravings taken from printed sources onto the colored sheets of paper in this book. There is no apparent theme to the materials he selected for inclusion and it is without a date. "Juvenile Studies in crayon by Charles S. Kelly" is a collection of drawings done by an eighteen year-old young man, whom Breck believed to be a promising artist. The drawings were a gift to the older man in 1861. A separate unlabeled and undated volume primarily contains small watercolors and drawings done by Breck of mostly buildings and scenic locations, including a church in Springfield, Massachusetts, the southern part of Capitol Hill in 1817, a view on the Hudson, and an alley in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

## Separation report

None.

## Related materials

Samuel Breck Diary, 1856. (Microfilm: XR 809)

Breck Family Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa.

Samuel Breck Collection (1840, 1862), American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pa.

See <http://www.amphilsoc.org/library/mole/b/breck.htm>

## Bibliography

American Philosophical Society, "Samuel Breck Collection, 1840, 1862,"

<http://www.amphilsoc.org/library/mole/b/breck.htm>.

## Subjects

Clothing and dress—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Conjoined twins—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Curiosities and wonders—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Etiquette—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Europe—History—1789-1815  
Europe—History—1815-1871  
Fads—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Grief and loss—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Manners and customs—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Merchants—Intellectual life—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Merchants—Social life and customs—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Mesmerism—19<sup>th</sup> century  
New England – Description and travel – 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Philadelphia (Pa.)—Economic conditions—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Philadelphia (Pa.)—History—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Philadelphia (Pa.)—Politics and government—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Philanthropists—Intellectual life—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Philanthropists— Social life and customs—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Politicians—Intellectual life—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Politicians—Social life and customs—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Shakers—Public opinion—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Visiting cards—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Yellow fever—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Weather—19<sup>th</sup> century

Breck, George

Breck, Hannah, 1747-1830

Breck, Samuel, 1747-1809



Breck, Samuel, 1771-1862  
Bunker, Chang, 1811-1874  
Bunker, Eng, 1811-1874  
Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790  
Girard, Stephen, 1750-1831  
Hamilton, Alexander, 1786-1875  
Jackson, Andrew, 1767-1845  
Lafayette, marquis de, 1757-1834  
Lloyd, Hannah, 1772-1846  
Lloyd, James, 1769-1831  
Napoleon I, Emperor of the French, 1769-1821  
Otis, Harrison Gray, 1765-1848  
Penn, William, 1644-1718  
Peters, Richard, 1743-1828  
Webster, Daniel, 1782-1852  
Whitefield, George, 1714-1770  
Yzarn, Godfroi marquis de Valady, b. 1765

Athenaeum of Philadelphia  
Historical Society of Pennsylvania  
Pennsylvania. General Assembly. House of Representatives  
Pennsylvania. General Assembly. Senate  
Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind  
Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture  
Schuylkill Bank (Philadelphia, Pa.)  
United States. Congress (18th, 1st session: 1823-1824). House

Drawing—19<sup>th</sup> century  
Watercolor painting—19<sup>th</sup> century

## **Administrative Information**

### **Restrictions**

None.

### **Acquisition information**

The collection has been assembled from the gifts of several donors: Mrs. C.P. Beauchamp Jeffreys, Mrs. Henry Shaw, Mrs. A.G. Grove, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1963. Volume 5 (accession 85:64) was the gift of Mr. G. Palmer LeRoy.

### **Preferred citation**

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Samuel Breck Papers (Collection 1887), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

### **Alternative Format**

Much of volume 15, along with excerpts from the diaries, was published in 1877: *Recollections of Samuel Breck*, edited by H.E. Scudder (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates).

### **Processing note**

Processing made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this finding aid do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

## Box and folder listing

### Series 1. Diaries

| Volume title | Date      | Volume  |
|--------------|-----------|---------|
| Diary        | 1800-1827 | vol. 1  |
| Diary        | 1823      | vol. 2  |
| Diary        | 1814-1827 | vol. 3  |
| Diary        | 1827-1831 | vol. 4  |
| Diary        | 1832-1833 | vol. 5  |
| Diary        | 1833-1835 | vol. 6  |
| Diary        | 1838-1841 | vol. 7  |
| Diary        | 1846-1856 | vol. 8  |
| Diary        | 1855      | vol. 9  |
| Diary        | 1857      | vol. 10 |
| Diary        | 1859      | vol. 11 |
| Diary        | 1862      | vol. 12 |

### Series 2. Travel logs

| Volume title              | Date | Volume  |
|---------------------------|------|---------|
| Trip to Boston            | 1822 | vol. 13 |
| Trip to Niagara, New York | 1828 | vol. 14 |

### Series 3. Lectures, Letters, Manuscripts, and Notes

| Folder/Volume title  | Date      | Box/Vol. | Folder   |
|--|-----------|----------|----------|
| Recollections  | 1830      | vol. 15  |          |
| Assorted letters and manuscripts   | 1795-1852 | vol. 16  |          |
| Assorted letters and manuscripts   | 1814-1844 | vol. 17  |          |
| Observations by Samuel Breck of Philadelphia on the Life of William Penn | 1850      | vol. 18  |          |
| Donations, chiefly testamentary, by Philadelphians                       | n.d.      | vol. 19  |          |
| Notes for Donations, chiefly testamentary, by Philadelphians             | 1848      | box 1    | folder 1 |
| Whitefield and His Times   | 1850      | vol. 20  |          |

|   |            |       |          |
|---|------------|-------|----------|
| Memoranda Respecting the Life of George Whitefield          | 1850, n.d. | box 1 | folder 2 |
| Interesting notices of the life of the Marquis de Lafayette | n.d.       | box 1 | folder 3 |
| Short Biography of the late Honorable Richard Peters        | 1828       | box 1 | folder 4 |
| Family papers and genealogy                                 | 1848, n.d. | box 1 | folder 5 |

#### **Series 4. Graphics**

| <b>Volume title</b>               | <b>Date</b> | <b>Volume</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Illustrations and Clippings       | n.d.        | vol. 21       |
| Juvenile studies by Charles Kelly | 1861        | vol. 22       |
| Untitled                          | n.d.        | vol. 23       |