



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Am .0802, Am .0803

Michael Hillegas (1729-1804)
Papers

1757-1782 (bulk 1777-1779)
1 box, 0.1 lin. feet

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Abstract

Michael Hillegas (1729-1804) was a merchant, sugar refiner, and iron magnate who used his wealth to assist the American revolutionary cause. He was involved in the young government's affairs as a member of the Provincial Assembly of Pennsylvania, treasurer of the Philadelphia Committee of Safety, and the first treasurer of the new United States of America. He married Henriette Boude (1731-1792) and with her had ten children.

Michael Hillegas's papers, 1757 to 1782, consist mainly of copies of outgoing letters that document his mercantile dealings, as well as his activities and the issues he faced during his term as the first treasurer of the United States. Included is a letter to American minister to France Benjamin Franklin in defense of the value of the new American currency and statements regarding the disbursement of large amounts of Continental Loan Office certificates to treasury offices in each of the thirteen colonies. Small glimpses of Hillegas's personal life are also contained in his letters, which reference the abandonment of his home during the British occupation of Philadelphia.

Background note

Michael Hillegas was born April 22, 1729, in Philadelphia to German immigrants George Michael Hillegas (1695-1749) and Margarete Hill (1705-1770). In 1753 Michael married Henriette Boude (1731-1792). The couple had ten children together: Samuel (1754-1819), Michael (1756-1757), William (1759-1759), Margarete (1760-1808), Deborah (1763-1770), Henrietta (1766-1812), Susanna (1769-1769), Henry (1771-1798), Deborah (1772-1856), and Mary Ann (1774-1817).

Hillegas was well educated and became a merchant and sugar refiner. He also maintained an interest in the manufacture of iron and in 1792 formed the Lehigh Coal Mining Company with two partners. Rumored to be a fine flutist and violinist himself, it is said that Hillegas operated the first music store in the colonies, offering instruments, tutors, ruled paper, strings, and sheet music. His business interests generated a considerable fortune, much of which was donated or loaned in support of the Revolutionary War. He was one of the original subscribers to the Bank of Pennsylvania, which was organized chiefly for the financial relief of the new government. Hillegas was one of the commissioners selected to choose a strategic location for the erection of Fort

Mifflin and was a member of the Board of Commissioners to Improve the Navigation of the Delaware in 1771. He served as a member of the Provincial Assembly of Pennsylvania from 1765 to 1775 and in 1774 he was appointed treasurer of the Philadelphia Committee of Safety. In 1775 Hillegas was selected by the Continental Congress to be the first treasurer of the United States, an office he held until its official establishment by an act of Congress in 1789. In the fourteen-year interim, he also served as the provincial treasurer of Pennsylvania in 1776 and was commissioned along with a friend, Joseph Parker, to provide for the needs of Native Americans in Philadelphia. In 1781 he was officially requested to revise for publication several major documents related to the nation's establishment, including the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, among others. Hillegas at one point was also one of the assistant judges to the mayor's court and from 1792 to 1804 served as an alderman of Philadelphia.

On September 29, 1804, Hillegas died at the age of seventy-five and was buried alongside many of Philadelphia's prominent citizens in Christ Church.

Scope & content

This collection consists of portions of at least two letterbooks belonging to Michael Hillegas. The letterbooks were disbound at some point and portions of them (approximately 100 letters) were later reassembled in two bindings, which have since been removed. The first of these (Am .0802) relates to Michael Hillegas's mercantile affairs. The second (Am .0803) pertains mainly to his duties as the first treasurer of the United States and largely concerns the disbursement of Continental Loan Office certificates.

Several letters document the sale of various goods by Hillegas, such as paper, linseed oil, brushes, grain, spices, liquor, calico, instruments, and sheet music. One letter, which briefly discusses the geographical extent of his insurance, suggests that his ventures extended to England, Ireland, Jamaica, and the Windward Islands; a few letters to business associates Samuel and Robert Purviance of Baltimore also discuss obtaining French goods for re-sale. Much of Hillegas's mercantile-related letters concern the settling of accounts. These range from friendly reminders to firm admonishments.

The majority of Hillegas's letters from his time as treasurer of the United States document the disbursement in 1777 and 1778 of large amounts of Continental Loan Office certificates to the respective commissioners of Continental Loan Offices in each of the thirteen colonies, an act which was ordered per resolution of Congress. Letters from 1777 discuss minor adjustments to the wording and to the colors of ink on Continental Loan Office certificates, as well as the possibility of printing new denominations and the time consuming task of hand-signing the certificates. In a noteworthy letter from March of 1778, Hillegas attempted to reassure Benjamin Franklin, who was then serving as minister in the court of Versailles, of the stability of the value of Continental Loan Office certificates. While in Europe, Franklin attempted to negotiate their equivalence in Spanish dollars, but came upon some opposition when told that the certificates had depreciated in value; Hillegas quoted Franklin as saying that

he could not "in conscience be concerned in negotiating them as equal in value." In his response, Hillegas reassured Franklin of the financial stability of the new country, reasoning that they were experiencing some inflation, but that the collection of taxes, which had commenced in most, if not all, states and was "very chearfully [sic] paid by all Whiggs," was lessening this effect.

Portions of a few scattered letters also provide glimpses into Hillegas's personal life. Although a Philadelphian, his outgoing letters from 1777 to late 1778 are written from York Town, Pennsylvania. During this time, he wondered about his Philadelphia home and "who has gotten into it." He asked friends in Philadelphia for any intelligence about his property and took every opportunity to curse the British. In a later letter he stated that he has learned that his home had been used as a hospital during the British occupation of the Philadelphia. As the father of a large family, Hillegas was also concerned about the future welfare of his offspring and in January of 1779 he attempted to secure the purchase of lands in Virginia, so that he might be able to pass something of value on to his children. In a letter from that year he reasoned: "It has been my fortune or misfortune soon after having arrived of age and almost ever since to be most of my time in public service, none of which has ever been any way lucrative so as to enable me to lay anything by for a numerous family." There is no further mention of this Virginia property in Hillegas's letters.

Miscellaneous papers include a page that appears to have removed from a receipt book, a brief note to Hillegas requesting loan certificates "to be sent to the Southward," and a note with the address of the Baron de Holtzendorff.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

Continental Loan Office Records, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.
Nathaniel Gilman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Bibliography

Du Bin, Alexander. *Old Philadelphia Families*. Philadelphia: The Historical Publication Society, 1939.

Germer, Mark, ed. "UA MUSIC LIBRARY READING ROOM NOTES No. 3.2 (2000-01)."

<http://www.uarts.edu/stuserv/libraries/resources/subjectguides/MusicLibrary/mlrrn3.2.html> (Accessed April 9, 2004).

Subjects

Merchants – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 18th century
Musical instrument industry – 18th century
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Commerce – 18th century
Philadelphia (Pa.) – History – 18th century
Philadelphia Campaign, 1777-1778
United States – Economic conditions – 18th century
United States – History – Revolution, 1775-1783 – Economic aspects

Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790 – Friends and associates
Hillegas, Michael, 1729-1804

United States. Continental Loan Office
United States. Dept. of the Treasury

Administrative Information

Restrictions

None.

Acquisition information

Gift of Charles Lockrey, 1905-1907.

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item here], Michael Hillegas Papers (Am .0802 and/or Am .0803), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

This collection was formerly known as Collection 287. It was housed in two bindings, which were removed for preservation purposes. With the exception of a few items, the contents of this collection were originally in letterbooks, which were disbound at some point. Portions of the disbound letterbooks were then hinged into the two bindings at a later date, along with a few miscellaneous documents.

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Folder listing

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Letters (Am .0803)	Feb.-Apr. 1777	3
Letters (Am .0803)	Apr. 1777 – Feb. 1778	4
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