



Historical Society
of Pennsylvania

Collection 308

Thomas Hutchins papers

Creator: Hutchins, Thomas, 1730-1789
1759-1807 (bulk 1773-1778)
3 boxes, 1 flat file, 1 linear foot

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Abstract

Thomas Hutchins (1730-1789) was a military engineer for the British Army from the 1750s to the 1770s, and eventually became the geographer of the United States. Before taking on this role, Hutchins worked on survey projects in the Midwest and Florida. As the nation's geographer, he worked primarily throughout the Mid-Atlantic States, most notably on the completion of the Mason-Dixon Line survey in the 1780s. His papers consist mostly of correspondence and reports on the topography of the United States and observations on the coast of Florida and on the navigability of rivers. There are also papers on surveying parties, describing the land surveyed and contact with Indian, French, and Spanish settlements. This collection provides an excellent account of North America while it was still relatively untouched and reflects both the scientific thinking of the era and the growing interest in westward expansion.

Background note

Thomas Hutchins, though best known as the geographer of the United States, served for over twenty years as an engineer with the British Army. He was born in Monmouth County, New Jersey, in 1730 to James Hutchins and Magdalen Pintard. Not much is known of Hutchins's early life and education, but he fought in the French and Indian War (1754-1763). By late 1757, was commissioned a lieutenant in the colony of Pennsylvania, and a year later he was promoted to quartermaster in Colonel Hugh Mercer's battalion and was stationed at Fort Duquesne near Pittsburgh.

In 1764, Hutchins began in earnest the work that would lead him to the position of the nation's geographer. That year, as an assistant engineer, he traveled with a military party to Ohio, near the Muskingum River, to survey the land and meet with several Native American tribes. In 1766, Hutchins joined George Croghan, deputy Indian agent, and Captain Henry Gordon, chief engineer in the Western Department of North America, on an expedition down the Ohio River to survey territory acquired by the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Hutchins worked in the Midwestern territories on land and river surveys for several years until he was transferred to the Southern Department of North America in 1772. He spent about five years working on survey projects in the western part of Florida. During this time he also occasionally traveled north, often to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His advancements in the fields of topography and geography led him to be elected a member of the American Philosophical Society in the spring of 1772.

Hutchins briefly moved to London in 1777 where he submitted one of his seminal works, *A Topographical Description of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina*. Hutchins also met with some trouble because, despite his years of service with the British Army, he sympathized with the American cause during the Revolution. He was arrested, charged with treason, and imprisoned. In 1780, he escaped to France and contacted Benjamin Franklin in the United States with a request to join the American army. In December of 1780, Hutchins sailed to Charleston, South Carolina.

Just nine months later, in May 1781, Hutchins was appointed geographer of the southern army, and shared duties with Simeon DeWitt, the geographer of the main army. Just a few months later, a new title was granted to both men, geographer of the United States. When DeWitt became the surveyor-general of New York in 1784, Hutchins held the prestigious title alone. From 1781 onward, he worked throughout Pennsylvania on road surveys and recommendations for the construction of new towns. Starting in 1783, he was sent to western Pennsylvania to run the boundary line between Virginia (now West Virginia) and Pennsylvania; this work resulted in the culmination of the Mason-Dixon Line survey that had begun decades earlier. As a follow-up to this project, Hutchins was later directed to survey the boundary of and run a boundary line between southwestern Pennsylvania and northern Virginia (now West Virginia) up to the Ohio River.

In 1787, Hutchins was briefly taken away from his Pennsylvania/Virginia project to assist with surveying the boundary line between New York and Massachusetts. He returned to western Pennsylvania about a year later, and died from an unknown illness in 1789. He was interred at the cemetery of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh.

Scope and content

The Thomas Hutchins papers span the bulk of Hutchins's career from the 1750s to the 1780s. It is an interesting collection containing maps and descriptions of the west at a time when almost all the land west of the Mississippi River remained unexplored by the Europeans. Relations with Native Americans and other colonizers, such as the Spanish, are mentioned frequently, and the descriptions give very useful accounts of wildlife, vegetation, and inhabitability of the land. The maps among the papers are, for the most part, very detailed and sometimes give latitudes and longitudes.

This collection was formerly housed in bound volumes which were disbound some decades ago. The current arrangement of the papers reflects the way the papers were placed in the volumes; therefore some papers on similar subjects remain in separate boxes. (For example, papers on the Shawanoe River can be found in Boxes 1 and 3.)

Making up the majority of the collection are Hutchins's remarks on and descriptions and maps of various lands (Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, the Great Lakes region and Canada, Ohio, Kentucky, and western Pennsylvania) and rivers (Mississippi, Ohio, Shawanoe, Cherokee, Cascauquiau, and Wabache). Among the most extensive of these descriptions are "Description of the sea coast, harbors, lakes, rivers, etc. of the Province of Florida" (Box 1, Folder 2); "Some remarks on Georgia" (Box 1, Folder 8); and "Short

description of the United States and Canada, with maps” (Box 1, Folder 11). Hutchins also made very detailed surveys of rivers; in particular, his maps and course readings of the Shawanoe River (Box 1, Folder 13) painstakingly document everything from the trees and towns surrounding the river to its small islands and tributaries. Aside from such descriptions, there are also several of Hutchins’s maps and plans, including those of mountains in North Carolina (Box 1, Folder 4), a plan of Fort Duquesne (Box 1, Folder 35), a plan of the fort at Pensacola (Box 2, Folder 20); and a plan for Fort Pitt (Box 3, Folder 38).

There are also several interesting journals in the collection that document Hutchins’s travels with other surveyors, such as a copy of a journal of a surveying party in Pensacola (Box 1, Folder 36), a “journal of a march from Fort Pitt to Venango and thence to Prequ’Isle” (Box 1, Folder 38), and a partial copy of a journal of one Captain H. Gordon (Box 1, Folder 39), who accompanied Hutchins and Indian agent George Croghan to Fort Pitt. On a related note, Box 3, Folder 34 contains Croghan’s own journal (though possibly a copy) of his travels in 1765 from Fort Pitt to Niagara. Such writings contain detailed information on the land, as well as encounters with Native American tribes. There are also a few journals that are not authored by Hutchins and have little to do with surveying, but do provide descriptions of various lands, such as “Observations on elephant bones found near the Ohio River by William Hunter” (Box 1, Folder 20), and an extract from the 1779 “journal of Sullivan’s campaign to the Susquehanna” (Box 1, Folder 21).

Making up the rest of the collection are various letters and a few financial papers, and other notable documents, such as Hutchins’s 1775 commission from King George III of England (Box 1, Folder 1). The scattered correspondence offers glimpses into Hutchins’s survey work, and later his work as geographer of the United States. Box 2 contains several letters to and from Hutchins about the completion of the Mason-Dixon Line survey in 1783 and 1784. The letters dating from 1785 to 1788 relate mostly to Hutchins’s work in western Pennsylvania, some of which contains further examples of encounters with native peoples. On July 8, 1786, Hutchins wrote to the president of Congress explaining how he “employed a faithfull[sic] person to marry a message to the Delaware, Wyandott[sic] and Shawanoes Tribes requesting them to send a chief from each of their [N]ations to accompany the surveyors during the time of their being employed in the western territory” (Box 3, Folder 1). As geographer of the United States, Hutchins regularly corresponded with surveyors in the field about their work and general needs.

Bibliography

Hutchins, Thomas. *A Topographical Description of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina*, 1778. Reprint with biographical sketch and list of Hutchins’s works by Frederick Charles Hicks. Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers, 1904.

Subjects

Florida – Surveys
Fort Duquesne (Pa.) – Maps
Fort Pitt (Pa.) – Maps
Georgia – Surveys
Hutchins, Thomas, 1730-1789 – Correspondence
Indians of North America – 1750-1790
Indians of North America – Government relations – History – 18th century
Land settlement – Florida
Land settlement – Georgia
Land settlement – Ohio
Land settlement – Pennsylvania
Land settlement – United States – History – 18th century
Mason-Dixon Line
Mississippi River – Description and travel – 18th century
Mississippi River – Discovery and exploration – 18th century
Mississippi River – History – 18th century
Ohio – Surveys
Ohio River – Description and travel – 18th century
Ohio River – Discovery and exploration – 18th century
Ohio River – History – 18th century
Pennsylvania – Surveys
Pittsburgh (Pa.) – History – 18th century
Surveys – Plotting

Hutchins, Thomas, 1730-1789

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Provenance unknown.

Alternative format

The collection is available on microfilm (XR 58).

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Thomas Hutchins papers (Collection 308),
The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

Processing made possible by generous donations from Lori Cohen and Clarissa Dillon.

When the collection was examined in December 2009, one folder was found empty: Box 2, Folder 34 (formerly Volume 2, page 87). This empty folder remains in the collection in the event that this material is found.

The 1786 diary of a survey around the Ohio River (Flat file 1) formerly had the collection numbers Society Oversize 45 and Society Oversize 20.

Box and folder listing

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Hutchins's commission from George III	24 September 1775	1	1
Description of the sea coast, harbors, lakes, rivers, etc. of the Province of Florida	circa 1784	1	2
Remarks and maps of various rivers and lakes, including the Mississippi, Armit, and Pontchartrain	undated	1	3
Maps of North Carolina mountains	undated	1	4
Observations on the Mississippi River	undated	1	5
Remarks on Havre de Grace	undated	1	6
Remarks on Ibberville [off the Mississippi River]	undated	1	7
Some remarks on Georgia	undated	1	8
Remarks on South Carolina	undated	1	9
Key to map of Settlement by Hutchins [see Box 2 folder 22 for map]	1766	1	10
Short description of the United States and Canada, with maps	undated	1	11
Description of part of the country westward of Ohio with distances from Fort Pitt to Indian towns	undated	1	12
Maps and course readings of the Shawanoe River	undated	1	13
Remarks on people settled westward of the Allegheny Mountains	undated	1	14
Hutchins to Robert Lettis Hoopes	28 November 1771	1	15
Locations of good lands on the Monongahela, Kanawha, etc.	undated	1	16
Remarks on Kentucky	undated	1	17
Remarks on the Illinois Country	undated	1	18
Route by land from Fort Pitt to Venango and then to Le Boeuff and Prequ'Isle	undated	1	19
Observations on "elephant bones" found near the Ohio River by William Hunter	circa 1768	1	20
Journal of Sullivan's campaign to the Susquehanna	August 1779	1	21
Account of Canada and the expedition of the French into the United States	undated	1	22
Course readings from various rivers	undated	1	23

Map and remarks on the Wabache River	undated	1	24
Observations on the Kaskaskiau (Cascauquiau) River and surrounding area	undated	1	25
Observations on the Fox and Ouisconsin rivers	undated	1	26
Description of the Cherokee River	undated	1	27
Description of the Great Lakes and part of Canada	undated	1	28
Map of the Ohio and its tributaries near Port Vincent	undated	1	29
James Elliot to Hutchins	14 April 1773	1	30
Remarks on a 1696 encounter between French and Spanish vessels	undated	1	31
Account of a journey in southwestern Pennsylvania	undated	1	32
Draft notes on Fort Pitt, southwestern Pennsylvania, and Ohio	undated	1	33
Remarks and map of the Cascauquiau River	undated	1	34
Plan of Fort Duquesne	undated	1	35
Journal of a surveying party, James Nowland [copy]	July-September 1774	1	36
Hutchins to James Young	6 August 1759	1	37
Journal of a march from Fort Pitt to Venango and thence to Prequ'Isle	undated	1	38
Journal of Captain H. Gordon 1766 [incomplete?]	undated	1	39
Astronomical observations	6 May 1766	1	40
Course of the Cherokee River	undated	1	41
Extracts from political essays on the present state of the British Empire, London 1772	undated	1	42
John Murray for hunting and bringing to Pensacola two of the Kings bullocks	5 June 1775	1	43
Hutchins in account with Robert Lettis Hoopes	3 July 1773	1	44
Hutchins to Robert Lettis Hoopes	28 December 1778	1	45
“Mr. Bruce” to Hutchins	11 March 1776	1	46
An estimate of the expense of works at Pensacola	8 May 1777	1	47
Extracts from the minutes of Congress	16 November 1779	1	48
P. Drouillard to Hutchins	20 March 1780	1	49
Observations of eclipses of Jupiter’s satellites	1784	1	50
An act for dividing the County of Lincoln into three distinct counties	1785	1	51

James Dickinson to Hutchins	4 April 1785	1	52
William Livingston to Hutchins	18 May 1785	1	53
Hutchins to [unknown]	12 December 1785	2	1
Adam Hoops to Hutchins	3 April 1786	2	2
Hutchins to the surveyors for the Western Territory	7 August 1786	2	3
Isaac Sherman to Hutchins	23 January 1787	2	4
Hutchins to Ebenezer Sproat	1 April 1787, 19 May 1787	2	5
Account with the Geographer's Department	1787	2	6
Peter D. Vroom to Joseph H. Skelton	23 May 1807	2	7
Extracts from different authors	undated	2	8
Recommending Joseph Story	undated	2	9
Hutchins to the president of Congress	undated	2	10
Names of Indian Nations living in and near the River Missouri	undated	2	10
Compliments of "Mr. James"	undated	2	11
Route from Fort Pitt to Sandusky and thence to Detroit	undated	2	12
Hutchins to the New York Assembly	undated	2	13
Remarks on the Kiskiminetas River	undated	2	14
Estimate of surveyor charges	undated	2	15
Astronomical observations of Ewing, Hutchins, Madison, and Elliot	undated	2	16
Miscellaneous extracts from various authors	undated	2	17
Drawing of the Fox River, Wisconsin	undated	2	18
Unidentified land survey	undated	2	19
Plan of the fort at Pensacola	undated	2	20
(Cahokia) map of settlement by Hutchins [see Box 1 folder 10 for key]	1766	2	21
Unidentified and partial maps	undated	2	22
Partial notes and clipping	undated	2	23
Description of New England	undated	2	24
Extracts from expeditions by the Abbé Raynal in the 1770s	undated	2	25
Partial description of military actions [in America?]	undated	2	26
Notes on Canada and New England	undated	2	27
List of state populations	1787	2	28
Number of inhabitants in the Rhode Island colony in 1730	undated	2	29
Estimate for exploring country west of the Mississippi	undated	2	30

Notes on Le Boeuf Fort	undated	2	31
Scattered notes on the Mississippi and other rivers	undated	2	32
Untitled song	undated	2	33
Distances from New Orleans	undated	2	33
[Folder found empty 12/10/09]	n/a	2	34
Jos. Phillips to Hutchins – Observations on the Giants Causeway in Ireland	undated	2	35
Notes on how to cure rheumatism	undated	2	36
Miscellaneous notes	undated	2	37
Journal of a survey of government lands on the north side of the Ohio River	1785-1786	2	38
Commission from Gov. Denny to quartermaster of 1 st Battalion	24 March 1759	2	39
Voucher for a padlock bought at Fort Pitt	28 April 1768	2	40
Voucher for line bought for works at Pensacola	1 July 1773	2	41
Edward Williams to Hutchins	22 February 1780, 13 March 1780	2	42-43
Hutchins to the president of Congress	11 July 1781	2	44
Joseph Purcell to Hutchins	15 May 1783	2	45
Hutchins to James Madison and other [for the boundary line]	16 October 1783	2	46
James Madison and other to the boundary commission [copy]	29 November 1783	2	47
Robert Aitken to Hutchins	16 March 1784	2	48
Hutchins to James Madison and others	5 April 1784	2	48
David Duncan to Hutchins	12 May 1784	2	49
[Hutchins?] to the executive council of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on the boundary between Pennsylvania and Virginia	1784	2	50
Copy of a letter to Gen. Alderman [New York]	12 March 1785	2	51
Robert Aitken to Hutchins	24 March 1785	2	52
John Fitch to Hutchins	18 April 1785	2	52
Jos. Phillips to Hutchins	30 May 1785	2	53
Letters from John Edgar and Louis Tournier to Nicolas La Chanse	1785	2	54
“Indian Intelligence” – statement from John (Leesh?)	circa 1785	2	55
Phillip Livingston to Hutchins	17 January 1786	2	55
Estimate of the expense of the Geographer Department	16 February 1786	2	56

David Duncan to Hutchins	28 March 1786	2	57
Adam Hoops to Hutchins	30 April 1786	2	58
American Philosophical Society membership certificate	20 January 1786	2	59
Rufus Putnam to Hutchins	7 July 1786	2	60
Hutchins to the president of Congress	8 July 1786	3	1
Hutchins to the gentlemen surveyors of the Western Territory	21 July 1786	3	2
Benjamin Tupper to Hutchins	22 July 1786	3	3
Hutchins to the president of Congress	September 1786	3	4
Jos. Harmar to Hutchins	20 August 1786, 10 October 1786	3	5
Hutchins to the president of Congress	12 October 1786	3	6
Jos. Harmar to Hutchins	26 October 1786	3	7
William W. Morris to Hutchins	27 October 1784, 10 March 1786	3	8-9
William Robins to Hutchins	29 March 1787	3	10
Adam Hoops to Hutchins	7 May 1787	3	11
E. P. Wegg to Hutchins	30 June 1787	3	12
William Duer to Hutchins	4 October 1787	3	13
Isaac Sherman and others to Hutchins	10 October 1787	3	14
Absalom Martin to Hutchins	25 October 1787	3	15
Richard Platt to Hutchins	22 November 1787	3	16
Account of Dr. James Simpson, Esq.	November-December 1787	3	16
Henry Knox to Hutchins	15 December 1787	3	17
Unknown correspondents	10 January 1785, 17 December 1787	3	18
Timothy Edwards to Hutchins	25 March 1788	3	19
Unknown correspondent	23 April 1788	3	20
Richard Platt to Hutchins	16 August 1788	3	21
Compliments of "Mr. Rogers" and Mr. and Mrs. Neil	undated	3	21
A return of stores on hand, etc., where	undated	3	22

deposited			
Description of road between Philadelphia and Reading	4 May 1784	3	23
Description of a journey from Philadelphia westward	7 June 1784	3	24
Remarks on the situation, soil, climate, settlements, and produce of the western country, etc.	undated	3	25
Tables of distances between Fort Pitt and the mouth of the Ohio River	undated	3	26
Map and description of the Ohio River from Pittsburgh down	undated	3	27
Boundaries of the Indian Nations westward of Fort Pitt, settled by themselves in 1750	undated	3	28
Distances from the Illinois River	undated	3	29
Course of the Shawanoe River	undated	3	30
General description of the sea, coast, harbors, etc. of west Florida	1769	3	31
Partial duplicates of general description of the sea, coast, harbors, etc. of west Florida	circa 1769	3	32
Remarks on the Mississippi River and its vicinity	undated	3	33
George Croghan's journal from Fort Pitt to Niagara	May-October 1765	3	34
Map of an unidentified river	undated	3	35
Unidentified map, possibly along the Susquehanna River	undated	3	36
Fragment of map showing part of the East River	undated	3	37
Plan of Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh)	4 April 1759	3	38
Diary (partial) of survey around Ohio River	circa October-December 1786	n/a	Flat file 1