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Guide to the

Robert Brooke papers relating to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal
1796-1845 [bulk 1804-1805]
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Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2016

Summary

Creator: Brooke, Robert, 1770-1821

Title: Robert Brooke papers relating to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal

Date: 1796-1845 [bulk 1804-1805]

Size: .42 linear feet (1 box, 1 volume, 1 other item)

Source: Purchased from Unger, 1919

Abstract: Robert Brooke was an American surveyor and civil engineer based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Robert Brooke papers relating to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, 1796-1845 (bulk 1804-1805), comprise five volumes used by Brooke chiefly during his work on the feeder canal to the proposed main line in 1804 and 1805; papers relating to a survey of private lands near the feeder canal, 1805; and a portfolio of watercolor drawings of aqueducts by the Canal's engineer Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1804. The volumes also include records of Brooke's work for Philadelphia canal companies, 1798-1799 and 1817, and surveys made in Philadelphia, 1806, as well as legal forms for land transactions, 1796-1816. A few manuscript documents, 1796-1845, and a printed broadside addressed to Stockholders of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company, 1824, are also present.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Robert Brooke papers relating to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library

Processing note: Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2016

Creator History

Robert Brooke (1770-1821) was an American surveyor and civil engineer based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Brooke's professional career coincided with nation-wide efforts to improve transportation and inland navigation through the building of roads, turnpikes, and canals, as urban centers planned their orderly geographic expansion. Robert Brooke conducted numerous street and road surveys in the Philadelphia

area over the years, especially as surveyor and regulator of the Northern Liberties district.

In the mid-1790s Brooke worked for the Delaware and Schuylkill Canal Navigation Company as deputy engineer to William Weston. That company was closely aligned with the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Navigation Company. Mutual officers and board members included prominent Philadelphians William Smith (1727-1803) and William Govett. In 1795, the Pennsylvania legislature passed an act allowing those companies to raise funds jointly by lottery, the monies to be apportioned between them. Robert Brooke acted as chief clerk for the Canal Lottery in the late 1790s. In 1811 the companies combined to form the Union Canal Company. During the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company's first attempt to build a canal across the Delmarva Peninsula, Brooke worked for the Canal's engineer Benjamin Henry Latrobe, from late Spring 1804 until construction ceased in early December 1805. As Latrobe's clerk of the works and deputy engineer, Brooke conducted surveys, oversaw contractors' work, handled billing arrangements and recordkeeping, and directed work in his absence. Benjamin Henry Latrobe was a British-American architect and civil engineer who, at that time, also held the position of Surveyor of the Public Buildings of the United States.

Robert Brooke resumed surveying in Philadelphia in January 1806, assisted by William Strickland and other canal associates, and later that year the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Company hired Brooke to survey the completed turnpike's entire length. In 1817, as an engineer for the Union Canal Company, Brooke surveyed land for a proposed canal connecting the Tioga branch of the Susquehanna River with Seneca Lake at Elmira, New York. At the time of his death Robert Brooke held the elected position of County Commissioner for Philadelphia County.

The Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company

The Chesapeake and Delaware Canal crosses the upper Delmarva Peninsula in Maryland and Delaware, connecting the Chesapeake Bay at Back Creek on the Elk River to the Delaware River at Reedy Point. The Canal opened to navigation in 1829 as a lock barge canal constructed and operated by the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company. The Company's earlier attempt to build the canal along a different route, led by its engineer Benjamin Henry Latrobe during the years 1803 through 1805, failed for lack of money. Renewed efforts in the early 1820s, however, enabled construction along the present route. The U.S. government purchased the canal in 1919, with subsequent improvements resulting in a wider and deeper sea-level ship canal.

The first practical efforts to build such a canal originated in the 1760s with Philadelphia merchants, led by Thomas Gilpin, who saw the need for a shorter water route connecting Susquehanna River trade to Philadelphia. But it was not until May 1803 that such plans came to fruition with the formal organization of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company and the election of officers and a board of directors at Wilmington, Delaware. This was preceded by the Company's incorporation in all three states involved in the venture: Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

Thomas Gilpin's youngest son, Joshua Gilpin, was a director and a member of its Committee of Survey, formed in June 1803. His cousin John Gilpin would later join the board. The Committee immediately hired Benjamin Henry Latrobe and others to survey and determine possible canal routes, and in January 1804 Latrobe was appointed engineer in charge of the Canal.

In April 1804 the board reviewed the options of an "upper route" and a "lower route." They chose the "upper route," stretching from Welch Point on the Elk River in Maryland to Christiana Creek (Christina River) near Mendenhall's Landing in Delaware, a terminus favoring Wilmington over New Castle. The Big Elk Creek at Elk Forge, near Elkton, Maryland, would serve as the elevated water source to feed the summit of the canal at a point west of Aikentown (now Glasgow) in Delaware. The first priority was

to build a five and a half mile feeder canal to bring water to the summit, since water was also needed to build the main canal. An aqueduct, called the Elk River aqueduct, would carry water from a mill race on the west side of the Creek to the start of the feeder canal on the east bank, with the feeder canal taking a southeasterly course to Aikentown.

Construction of the feeder canal began on May 2, 1804. While Latrobe pushed the work forward, directors struggled to maintain the flow of income, hindered by delinquent subscribers and the inability to obtain government funds. Staff reductions took place in mid-1805, and all staff were discharged as of December 1, except its officers. Latrobe stayed on until June, 1806. The feeder canal was nearly completed, with a little over a mile of work remaining. Although an abutment of the Elk River aqueduct was begun in August 1804, it remained unfinished. The approaches to another aqueduct at Cow River were built, but not the structure itself.

In spite of the Company's continued lobbying to obtain funding, public interest in the canal languished until 1821. That year marked the publication of Joshua Gilpin's *A Memoir on the rise, progress and present state of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal*, and the involvement of Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey, whose successful fundraising campaign in 1822-23 made possible the renewal of the project. A review of earlier work and new surveys led to the approval of a shorter, lower route, that of the present-day Canal. It was not far from the "lower route" proposed at an earlier time. Construction began in 1824, the year Joshua Gilpin retired from the board.

Scope and Content Note

The Robert Brooke papers relating to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, 1796-1845 (bulk 1804-1805), comprise five volumes used by Brooke chiefly during his work on the feeder canal to the proposed main line in 1804 and 1805; papers relating to a survey of private lands near the feeder canal, 1805; and a portfolio of watercolor drawings of aqueducts by the Canal's engineer Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1804. Brooke's employment on other public works is also represented.

Four volumes, consisting of a contract record book, two surveying notebooks, and a surveying record book document Brooke's work on the Chesapeake and Delaware feeder canal, 1804-1805. They generally contain survey notes, measurements and diagrams; data, computations and billing of contracted work; and the date and location of work done.

The contract record book, 1804 November-1805, marked "Book No. 1," documents construction work completed by Watson, Pollock, Cochran, Randle & Coxey, and others. Some undated contracts are also mentioned in the 1805 survey record book. Surveying notebooks consist of field notes in pencil for 1805 February-March, and field notes in pen and ink for 1805 February-September, incorporating information from the pencilled volume. The surveying record book, 1805 and 1817, pertains to work on the Chesapeake and Delaware feeder canal, 1805 June-December, formalizing and continuing the usual documentation. It also includes his survey notes for a proposed canal near Newtown (Elmira), New York, with related cash accounts, 1817 October-December.

A fifth volume, an account and record book, was used by Brooke for multiple purposes from 1796 to 1816. This volume, with the heading "Book of Sales No. 2," is the second volume of accounts for the Canal Lottery in Philadelphia, recording tickets sales by Brooke for treasurer William Govett, 1798-1799. The first volume is not present in the collection. Also included is a tabular list of surveys and regulations conducted in Philadelphia by Brooke, William Strickland and others, dated 1806 January-July. Copied legal documents, serving as forms for land transactions, begin from the reverse end of the volume. Their original dates span 1796 to 1816.

In addition to the volumes there are papers documenting the survey of lands belong to John Gilpin and others in the vicinity of the feeder canal, 1805.

The collection notably contains undated technical drawings executed in pencil, pen-and-ink and watercolor by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, depicting aqueducts on the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. Three sheets show the plan, south elevation, and transverse section of the aqueduct over Elk Creek, called the Elk River aqueduct; a fourth sheet contains two drawings, showing the elevation and the transverse section of the aqueduct over Cow Run. Latrobe is known to have made such drawings in the summer of 1804.

Miscellaneous documents, 1796-1845, include a brief letter from William Smith to Brooke regarding canal-related damages in Philadelphia, 1796, with surveying accounts and other items dated 1803-1818. A copied legal form, 1821, and copies of business letters written by Philadelphia surveyor Joseph H. Siddall, 1845, are also present.

A printed broadside addressed to the Stockholders of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company, dated 1824, is included in the collection.

Key Terms

Geographic Names

Big Elk Creek (Pa. and Md.)
Chesapeake and Delaware Canal (Del. and Md.) -- History

Subjects

Canals -- Delaware
Canals -- Design and construction
Canals -- Maryland
Canals -- New York (State)
Canals -- Pennsylvania
Surveying -- Pennsylvania -- Philadelphia

Occupations

Civil engineers
Surveyors

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Conveyances
Field notes
Land surveys
Technical drawings

Names

Latrobe, Benjamin Henry, 1764-1820
Gilpin family
Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Company
Delaware and Schuylkill Canal Company
Schuylkill and Susquehanna Navigation
Union Canal Company of Pennsylvania

Container List

- b. 1 f. 1 Contract record book 1804 November-1805 (1 volume)
- b. 1 f. 2 Surveying notebook 1805 February-March (1 volume)
- b. 1 f. 3 Surveying notebook 1805 February-September (1 volume)
 - v. 1 Surveying record book 1805, 1817 (1 volume)
- b. 1 f. 4 Account and record book 1796-1816 (1 volume)
- b. 1 f. 5 Survey of land belonging to John Gilpin and others 1805
- b. 1 f. 6 Miscellaneous documents 1796-1818, 1821, 1845
Chesapeake and Delaware Canal drawings by Benjamin Henry Latrobe (In pencil, pen and ink, and watercolor. Signed "B.H. Latrobe, Eng'r")
 - o. 1 *Plan of the aqueduct over Elk Creek Ch: & Del. Canal feeder* 1804
 - o. 1 *South, or downstream elevation of the Aqueduct over Elk Creek* 1804
(Aqueduct arch bears inscription "Elk River Aqueduct. Begun MDCCCIV. Aug.")
 - o. 1 *Transverse section of the aqueduct over Elk Creek* 1804
 - o. 1 *Elevation of the aqueduct over the head of Cow Run and Transverse section*
1804 (Two drawings on one sheet)
- b. 1 f. 7 *To the stockholders of the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal* 1824 May 10 (Printed broadside)
Signed "A Philadelphia Stockholder"