

Guide to the Thomas Thistlewood Papers

OSB MSS 176



by Diane Ducharme

October 2011

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
P. O. Box 208330
New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

CALL NUMBER: OSB MSS 176

CREATOR: Thistlewood, Thomas, 1721-1786

TITLE: Thomas Thistlewood papers

DATES: 1748-1792

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 9.26 linear feet (13 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers consist of diaries, weather journals, commonplace books, reading notes and other material documenting the life, work and intellectual interests of the Jamaican plantation overseer and slaveowner Thomas Thistlewood. This highly detailed record of his activities as an overseer and later owner of numerous slaves contains information on his criteria for the purchase and sale of slaves, methods of assigning work, allotment of provisions, the illness and death rate among them, and detailed descriptions of Thistlewood's brutal methods of physical punishment for any infraction.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.thistle>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.thistle>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Purchased from Sotheby's London on the James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Fund, 2011.

Custodial History

From the collection of William John Monson, Baron Monson. Deposited at Lincolnshire Archives in 1951.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

The Thomas Thistlewood Papers are the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation

Thomas Thistlewood Papers. James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Processing Information

This collection received a basic level of processing, including housing and minimal organization, in 2011.

The 92 volumes of the Thistlewood Papers were arranged and numbered in the nineteenth century while in the possession of William John Monson, Baron Monson, and this order has been preserved in this finding aid.

Information included in the Description of Papers note and Collection Contents section is partially drawn from information supplied with the collection by Sotheby's London. This finding aid may be updated periodically to account for revisions in arrangement and description.

Thomas Thistlewood (1721-1786)

Thomas Thistlewood (1721-1786), was born in Lincolnshire, England. The second son of a farmer, he was educated in Ackworth, Yorkshire, where he received training in mathematics and in "practical science." After a two-year voyage on one of the East India Company's ships as its supercargo, Thistlewood returned to England and decided to seek employment in Jamaica, emigrating in 1750.

He began his Caribbean life as an overseer of sugar plantations, principally of John Cope's Egypt plantation in Westmoreland parish, where he supervised numerous slaves in sugar production. During these years, Thistlewood gradually acquired slaves of his own, whom he rented out to other planters. In 1767 he completed the purchase of his own plantation, Breadnut Island, a "pen" where his thirty or so slaves raised provisions and livestock.

Thistlewood also pursued a variety of scientific and intellectual interests. He acquired several hundred books, often on scientific and technical subjects; collected and described medicinal plants and other botanical specimens; and kept a detailed weather record for thirty-four years. The gardens at Breadnut Island were considered among the finest in western Jamaica before they were ruined in the hurricane of October 1780.

Thistlewood never married, but had one son, Mulatto John (d. 1780), by his slave Phibbah, who was originally a slave of his employer. Thistlewood eventually purchased her from Cope and lived with her at Breadnut Island; he called her his "wife" in the will that freed her. He never returned to England, and died at Breadnut Island, Jamaica in November 1786.

Scope and Contents

The papers consist of diaries, weather journals, commonplace books, reading notes and other material documenting the life, work and intellectual interests of the Jamaican plantation overseer and slaveowner Thomas Thistlewood. This highly detailed record of his activities as an overseer and later owner of numerous slaves contains information on his criteria for the purchase and sale of slaves, methods of assigning work, allotment of provisions, the illness and death rate among them, and detailed descriptions of Thistlewood's brutal methods of physical punishment for any infraction.

Thistlewood also meticulously recorded his sexual exploitation of enslaved women, noting thousands of sexual contacts with over 100 women, as well as any punishments he ordered if they resisted. The diaries also describe his decades-long relationship with the enslaved Phibbah, whom he referred to as his "wife" and emancipated in his will.

Comments on "insolent" and "runaway slaves," frequent news of slave uprisings on individual plantations, and rumors of broader slave insurrections and rebellions, including Tacky's Revolt (1760), offer insight into the fears of the small minority of white colonists who ruled over but were vastly outnumbered by the enslaved Africans, as well as into the sustained resistance of the enslaved themselves. Thistlewood also describes his contacts with the Jamaican Maroons, escaped slaves and their descendants who inhabited the mountainous areas of the island.

Other topics include personal and professional relationships with other white Jamaicans, including his first employer, John Cope, and the Cope family; expenses and purchases: meals and other entertainment; and recreational activities, including Christmas celebrations.

Also contained in Series I is one diary by Thistlewood's nephew John Thistlewood (died 1768). A manuscript treatise on planting, by John Palley Edwards, is bound with the diary for 1763.

Arrangement

Organized into three series: I. Diaries, 1748-1786; II. Weather Reports, 1752-1786; III. Reading Notes and Other Papers, 1748-1792.

Collection Contents

Series I: Diaries, 1748-1786

2.5 linear feet (6 boxes)

Series I, Diaries, consists of 37 diaries containing daily entries dating between 1750 and 1786. Topics include Thistlewood's work as an overseer, and later owner, of slaves, including his methods of assigning work, allotting provisions, and discipline; his personal and sexual relationships with several slaves, including his lengthy relationship with Phibbah, his slave "wife"; and slave rebellions and rumors of rebellions, particularly Tacky's Revolt (1760). Other topics include personal and professional relationships with white Jamaicans, including his first employer, John Cope, and his family; purchases and expenses; meals and other entertainments; and recreational activities. The diary for 1763 is bound with *A manuscript treatise on planting, by Mr. John Palley Edwards*. There is one diary by Thistlewood's nephew, John Thistlewood (d. 1768).

Arranged in two subseries: Diaries of Thomas Thistlewood and Diary of John Thistlewood.

Diaries of Thomas Thistlewood

| | | |
|-------------|--|-----------|
| b. 1, f. 1 | 1. Diary | 1748-1750 |
| b. 1, f. 2 | 2. Diary | 1751 |
| b. 1, f. 3 | 3. Diary | 1752 |
| b. 1, f. 4 | 4. Diary Contains entries for January only. 37 pages of loose entries laid in at the end of the volume. | 1753 |
| b. 1, f. 5 | 5. Diary | 1754 |
| b. 2, f. 6 | 6. Diary | 1755 |
| b. 2, f. 7 | 7. Diary | 1756 |
| b. 2, f. 8 | 8. Diary | 1757 |
| b. 2, f. 9 | 9. Diary | 1758 |
| b. 2, f. 10 | 10. Diary | 1759 |
| b. 2, f. 11 | 11. Diary | 1760 |
| b. 2, f. 12 | 12. Diary | 1761 |
| b. 3, f. 13 | 13. Diary | 1762 |
| b. 3, f. 14 | 14. Diary Bound with: <i>A Manuscript Treatise on Planting, by Mr. John Palley Edwards</i> | 1763 |
| b. 3, f. 15 | 15. Diary | 1764 |
| b. 3, f. 16 | 16. Diary | 1765 |
| b. 3, f. 17 | 17. Diary | 1766 |
| b. 4, f. 18 | 18. Diary | 1767 |

Diaries of Thomas Thistlewood (continued)

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|-----------|
| b. 4, f. 19 | 19. Diary | 1768 |
| b. 4, f. 20 | 20. Diary | 1769 |
| b. 4, f. 21 | 21. Diary | 1770 |
| b. 4, f. 22 | 22. Diary | 1771 |
| b. 4, f. 23 | 23. Diary | 1772 |
| b. 5, f. 24 | 24. Diary | 1773 |
| b. 5, f. 25 | 25. Diary | 1774 |
| b. 5, f. 26 | 26. Diary Also includes list of books and other items. | 1775 |
| b. 5, f. 27 | 27. Diary | 1776 |
| b. 5, f. 28 | 28. Diary | 1777 |
| b. 5, f. 29 | 29. Diary | 1778 |
| b. 6, f. 30 | 30. Diary | 1779 |
| b. 6, f. 31 | 31. Diary | 1780 |
| b. 6, f. 32 | 32. Diary | 1781 |
| b. 6, f. 33 | 33. Diary | 1782 |
| b. 6, f. 34 | 34. Diary | 1783 |
| b. 6, f. 35 | 35. Diary | 1784 |
| b. 6, f. 36 | 36. Diary | 1785 |
| b. 6, f. 37 | 37. Diary | 1786 |
| Diary of John Thistlewood | | |
| b. 7, f. 38 | 38. Diary | 1763-1765 |

Series II: Weather Journals, 1752-1786

1.25 linear feet (3 boxes)

Series II, Weather Journals, consists of 34 annual journals containing daily weather summaries, including precipitation measurements. Diaries from 1764 through 1767 also contain separate lists of daily Fahrenheit temperatures and rainfall amounts.

Chronologically arranged.

| | | |
|----------------|---|-----------|
| b. 7, f. 39-51 | 39-51. Weather journals | 1752-1765 |
| b. 8, f. 52-65 | 52-65. Weather journals | 1766-1779 |
| b. 9, f. 66-72 | 66-72. Weather journals | 1780-1786 |

Series III: Reading Notes and Other Papers*5.51 linear feet (4 boxes)*

Series III, Reading Notes and Other Papers, consists of twenty volumes, most in Thistlewood's hand. The papers in this series contain Thistlewood's notes on his reading of European philosophy, literature, science, medicine, and botany and lists of his books and book collection, alongside accounts and other papers, including inventories by Thistlewood of his slaves; lists of moveable property and game; and miscellaneous papers. Volumes include *Mr. Richard Beckford's Instructions* for overseers of sugar plantations; a scribal volume of navigational problems; and a volume containing items relating to Jamaica, including poems and council meeting minutes.

Arranged by Monson volume number.

| | | |
|--------------|--|-----------------------|
| b. 10, f. 73 | 73. Reading notes, commonplace entries and memoranda Notes on scientific subjects, including electricity; natural history; travel and exploration; alphabets and languages; mathematics, including magic squares; and poetry | undated |
| | 74. Reading notes Stored in: Oversize, Box 12, folder 87 Contents include a variety of reading notes; medical receipts; lists of plants with some sketches; mathematical notes; and financial notes including copies of bonds | undated |
| | 75. Reading notes Stored in: Oversize, Box 12, folder 88 Contents include a variety of reading notes and lists of plants, some with sketches | [1777 and after] |
| | 76. Reading notes Stored in: Oversize, Box 12, folder 89 Contents include reading notes; notes on natural history, practical science, and indigo production; and observations and statistic concerning the West Indies | 1785 -1786 |
| | 77. Reading notes Stored in: Oversize, Box 12, folder 90 Scientific notes, including extensive <i>Extracts, from a Course of Lectures on Chymistry</i> | undated |
| | 78. Reading notes Stored in: Oversize, Box 12, folder 91 Contents include extensive notes from <i>A Course of Experimentall Philosophy</i> by <i>J. T. Desaguliers</i> , including some machinery sketches; notes concerning Jamaica and tables recording slave labor, 1754-1756 | 1754-1756, undated |
| b. 10, f. 74 | 79. Reading notes Extracts from and comments on <i>A New and Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, By a Society of Gentlemen</i> (1754) | undated |
| b. 10, f. 75 | 80. Reading notes Extracts from and comments on <i>The Philosophical Grammar</i> by Benjamin Martin; <i>A New Geographical and Historical Grammar</i> , by Salmon; and other works; also includes mechanical sketches | undated |
| b. 11, f. 76 | 81. Sundry Memorandums 1777 Almost entirely lists of books belonging to Thistlewood and to others | 1777-1786 |

| | | |
|--------------|---|-----------------------|
| b. 11, f. 77 | 82. 1720/1 to 1745 Lists of books | undated |
| b. 11, f. 78 | 83. Genealogical and antiquarian notes Includes notes on Thistlewood family history and antiquarian and topographical notes on Lincolnshire | [1740s] |
| b. 11, f. 79 | 84. Account book kept by Thistlewood | 1745-1746 |
| b. 11, f. 80 | 85. Inventories of property taken by Thistlewood to Jamaica Includes lists of books | 1750 |
| b. 11, f. 81 | 86. Westmoreland April 10th 1754. Mr. Richard Beckford's Instructions In six sections, headed "1. The Care and Management of White Servants & Slaves; 2. of Mules & Neat Cattle; 3. Of Buildings; 4. The Culture of the Soil; 5. The Making of Sugar; 6. The Distillery." | 1754 April 10 |
| b. 11, f. 82 | 87. Copies of documents concerning Jamaica Contents include minutes of meetings of the council of war; memoranda; and satirical poems | [1756 and after] |
| b. 11, f. 83 | 88. Jamaica. List of Negroes belonging to Mr. Thomas Thistlewood, formerly of Tupholme Lincolnshire, with a Tabular account of their weekly labour, between 1758 & 1766 | 1758-1766 |
| b. 11, f. 84 | 89. Egypt Plantation, Westmoreland, Jamaica Contents include detailed weather reports for Egypt Plantation for 1767; a memorandum on the climate of Jamaica; an explanation of Thistlewood's methodology in taking these weather measurements; and a poem copied from the <i>St. Jago Intelligencer</i> | 1767-1768, undated |
| b. 11, f. 85 | 90. An Account of the Gaim which I shot in the Island of Jamaica Beginning in the Year 1764 Thistlewood's game book | 1764-1765 |
| b. 11, f. 86 | 91. Navigational textbook Manuscript textbook, in a single scribal hand, containing various problem sets relating to charting courses, methods of sailing, measurement and gauging, and geometry Laid in: autograph letter signed from John Carter to J. S. Padley, Horncastle, 1853 November 22. Concerns the ownership of the Thistlewood papers. Enclosure: autograph letter signed from J. F. Wray to an unidentified recipient, 1852 February 9 | [1750s] |
| | 92. Notes concerning Lincolnshire Stored in: Oversize, Box 13, folders 93-95 Notes recording information on farming in Lincolnshire, including weather reports; probably by a Thistlewood family member | 1779-1792 |

Oversize

| | | |
|-----------------|---|----------------------------|
| b. 12, f. 87 | 74. Reading notes and other notes | [1770s] |
| b. 12, f. 88 | 75. Reading notes and other notes | [1777 September and after] |
| b. 12, f. 89 | 76. Reading notes | 1785-1786 |
| b. 12, f. 90 | 77. Reading notes | undated |
| b. 12, f. 91 | 78. Reading notes | [1750s] |
| b. 13, f. 92-95 | 92. Notes concerning Lincolnshire | 1779-1792 |

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Book collectors -- Jamaica
Books and reading -- Jamaica
Botany -- Jamaica
Enlightenment -- Jamaica
Hurricanes -- Jamaica
Learning and scholarship -- Jamaica
Master and servant -- Jamaica
Medicinal plants -- Jamaica
Meteorology -- Observations
Natural history -- Jamaica
Navigation -- Early works to 1800
Plantation life -- Early works to 1800
Plantation life -- Jamaica
Plantation overseers -- Jamaica
Plantation owners -- Jamaica
Slaveholders -- Jamaica
Slavery -- Jamaica
Slavery -- Jamaica -- Early works to 1800
Slaves -- Jamaica -- Social conditions
Slaves -- Social conditions
Slave trade -- Jamaica
Sugar plantations -- Early works to 1800
Sugar plantations -- Jamaica
Sugar trade -- Early works to 1800
Sugar trade -- Jamaica

Cope, John, of Jamaica
Edwards, John Palley
Long, Edward, 1734-1813
Phibbah
Thistlewood, John, d. 1768
Thistlewood, Thomas, 1721-1786
Thistlewood, Thomas, 1721-1786 -- Books and reading

Geographic Names

Great Britain -- Colonies -- America
Jamaica -- Climate -- Observations
Jamaica -- Description and travel
Jamaica -- Economic conditions
Jamaica -- Social conditions
West Indies, British

Genres / Formats

Commonplace books -- Jamaica -- 18th century
Diaries -- Jamaica -- 18th century
Inventories -- Jamaica -- 18th century
Weather diaries -- Jamaica -- 18th century

Names

Beckford, Richard, of Jamaica