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Paging Instructions

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Overview

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CALL NUMBER: MS 495

CREATOR: Ticknor, Benajah, 1788-1858.

TITLE: Benajah Ticknor papers

DATES: 1818-1852

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 1.5 linear feet (3 boxes)

LANGUAGE(S): The materials are in English.

SUMMARY: Journals, letterbook, medical notes, and essays of Benajah Ticknor, doctor and surgeon with the U.S. Navy. Of primary importance are the journals which describe journeys made by Ticknor with the Navy to South America, the Far East, and Europe.

FINDING AID LINK: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, use the following address: http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/mssa.ms.0495.

Administrative Information

Provenance

Gift of Donald J. Warner, 1946.

Information about Access

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Cite As

Benajah Ticknor Papers (MS 495). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Alternative Formats

Entire collection is available on microfilm (3,377 frames on 3 reels, 35mm.) from Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, at cost. Order no. HM43.

Biographical/Historical Sketch

Benajah Ticknor was born in Salisbury, Connecticut, in 1788, graduated from the Berkshire Medical Institute around 1810, received an honorary M. D. from Yale in 1836, and died in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1858. He was the nephew of Caleb Bingham of Boston, 1757-1817, the noted lexicographer and grammarian. Ticknor's brother Caleb, ?-1841, was a leading practitioner of homeopathy in New York City. Another brother Luther served in the Connecticut General Assembly from Salisbury in 1833.

After receiving his medical degree, Ticknor moved from Connecticut to Ohio and in 1816 married Helen Bostwick of Canfield, Ohio. At approximately the same time he applied for service with the U.S. Navy as a surgeon but was not immediately called to duty. His first assignment came in 1818. At this time he began his journals describing the voyages and daily events of his service with the Navy until 1852, when he retired as Chief Surgeon of the Boston Navy Yard.

Description of the Collection

Journals, letterbook, medical notes, and essays of Benajah Ticknor, doctor and surgeon with the U.S. Navy. Of primary importance are the journals which describe journeys made by Ticknor with the Navy to South America, the Far East, and Europe.

It should be noted that Ticknor apparently made notes of his adventures and then copied the journals that are now in this collection. It is impossible to say how much time elapsed between taking notes and making these copies. It would seem that he wrote these journals at the end of each voyage or, on a given voyage, copied the journal of his preceding voyage as a means of passing the time, since his cruises usually lasted three years apiece.

The journals do not cover the years 1822-1831, 1834-1837, or 1843-1844. During the first period he seems to have traveled to Michigan, bought land there, went on a cruise to South America, and then was stationed at Key West. During the second period he seems to have been stationed at Boston, for his essays are dated from there. The gap here prevents us from having any idea of why Yale gave him an honorary degree in 1836. From 1843 to the end of 1844 he was probably in Michigan, or, as he was accustomed to do while ashore, traveled between Michigan, Ohio, New York, Salisbury, and Boston.

Arrangement

Arranged in two series: I. Journals. II. General Subject File.
Journal I (1818-1821) is in three parts with some pages missing between the first and second. It is marked in pencil: "Burn this journal without reading it. It is copied in another--some of the remarks about officers are omitted--which the writer would not like to be read." The journal U. S. Frigate Macedonian, commanded by Commander John Downes, to South America and Mexico from 1818 to 1821. Included here are fairly detailed descriptions of Norfolk, Virginia, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Panama, Valparaiso, and Acapulco, as well as Ticknors' stern comments on the inhabitants of these cities, their trade, customs, politics, and moral standards. No matter what the place, Ticknor usually concentrated his remarks on the evil effects of the climate, disease, poor soil, filthy habits, archaic political forms, hireling priests, idolatry, and general profligacy. As for his own countrymen, aboard the Macedonian, Ticknor was severely critical of the drunkenness of the crew, the low morals of his fellow officers, and the selfish incompetence of Captain Downes.

Ticknor does, however, give some valuable information on the movement for independence in South America. The Macedonian arrived in Chile after that country had broken away from Peru. During most of Ticknor's visit on the coast of Chile and Peru, the British adventurer, Lord Cochrane, was helping the rebels, Jose de San Martin and Bernardo O'Higgins, lead the Chilean Navy on blockading the Peruvian royalists led by Jose Miguel Carrera. Ticknor gives a detailed account of Cochrane's daring capture of the royalist ship Esmeralda right from under the guns of the enemy forces. Ticknor also reveals an incident in which an American officer was killed and a supply party detained by the royalists. This incident should not be confused with the detention of the American merchant brig, also called the Macedonian alluded to by A. P. Whitaker, The United States and the Independence of Latin America. Ticknor's journal reveals that the South American rebels were not so friendly toward the citizens of the new American republic as might be supposed.

Journal II (1831-1833) is in three bound and one unbound volumes. Two of the bound volumes and the odd volume appear to be Ticknor's first version of this journal, which relates his voyage aboard the sloop-of-war U.S.S. Peacock, commanded by Captain David Geisinger, conveying America's first diplomatic envoy to Cochin China, Siam, and Muscat, from 1831 to 1833. The three original parts of the journal deal with the complete voyage, but the pages are missing which describe the visit to Siam. The third and largest volume is a revision of the earlier account; it includes the visit to Siam but breaks off before the ship reached Muscat.

The Peacock first touched at Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, where Ticknor reported the news of a vicious raid by Captain Duncan of the U.S.S. Lexington on pirates in the Falkland Islands. At Rio Ticknor mentioned seeing the English exploring ship Beagle, the ship which was carrying Charles Darwin on his first voyage. Sailing east, the ship visited Benkulen, Sumatra, where Ticknor reported the events of Captain Downes' massacre of 170 natives at Quallah Battoo. After touching briefly at Manila, the ship sailed north to Canton, the
features and inhabitants of which Ticknor describes in detail. Though the American envoy, Edmund Roberts, was empowered to visit Japan, he was discouraged from doing so by news of Japan's traditional dislike of foreigners. Consequently, the Peacock sailed south to Cochin China at the mouth of the Mekong River in present Cambodia. Roberts' dealings with the local officials ended in the failure of this part of the mission. Roberts' diplomacy was more successful in Siam and Muscat, and these visits enabled Ticknor to make his usual observations on the natives and their customs, ending with a description of Mozambique on the Peacock's homeward voyage. Needless to say, Ticknor continued to make disparaging remarks of the ship's crew and officers and captain. Ticknor attributed almost half of the sickness and accidents aboard the Peacock to the influence of alcohol, and was continually upset with the fact that religious services were not held aboard ship twice a day as naval regulations required.

Since this voyage was America's first real diplomatic venture in the Orient, Ticknor's journal is of great significance. In Cochin China, when it appeared that the mission's Canton interpreter could not translate Cochin Chinese, Ticknor himself carried on communications with the officials through a Catholic priest in Latin. Moreover, the only other sources of information of this voyage are the ship's official reports and Roberts' journal, which when published, was censored by the Jackson administration because of the failure of negotiations with Cochin China.

**Journal III** (1837) in one large bound volume describes the preparations for the U. S. Navy's exploring expedition to the South Pole which ultimately became Wilkes' expedition to Oregon aboard the U.S.S. Peacock. As Ticknor's journal reveals, the voyage was originally entrusted to Captain Thomas and Catesby Jones, and Ticknor was to be the fleet surgeon. Jones never sailed with the voyage nor did Ticknor nor of course did the ship reach the South Pole, Ticknor's journal gives ample evidence for explaining why the original purposes of the voyage were not fulfilled.

Jones was an erratic character who later achieved distinction by seizing the Mexican port of Monterey in 1842 some four years before the rest of the country declared war on Mexico. His clashes with his superiors and, according to Ticknor, his declining health induced Jones to resign from this command. Numerous other senior officers declined the post until young Lieutenant Charles Wilkes accepted the command. Besides the confusion about the command, Ticknor noted that his fellow subordinate officers were assigned to the voyage without regard to their ability or interest in a scientific exploration. In fact, it was rumored that most of the junior officers had been assigned to the cruise by Commodore Isaac Hull because they had dangerous knowledge of Hull's suspicious financial dealings and that the Commodore was quite content to get them out of the country on cruise from which they would not return for a long time, if at all. Feelings of discontent also infected the crew of the Peacock, one third of whom deserted before the ship left Norfolk. Finally, the ships were far too small in Ticknor's opinion to accommodate the scientists or their equipment, and that the rations and clothing provided for the voyage was slow in arriving and quite unsuitable for polar climates. As a result, Ticknor got excused from the trip soon after Jones did, and the expedition sailed without them.

Ashore Ticknor visited Washington and New York in the latter part of 1837, hoping to be assigned as Chief Surgeon at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In his travels, he rubbed elbows with a number of Whig politicians: Representative Thomas Whittlesey of Connecticut, Samuel Southard a Senator from New Jersey, ex-Senator Tazewell of Virginia, and Chancellor James Kent of New York. In the House of Representatives Ticknor heard
John Quincy Adams and Francis W. Pickens argue against and for the annexation of Texas, respectively. In the Senate he heard Webster's speech favoring the immediate issue of Treasury notes bearing interest to provide a sound currency in financial upheavals of 1837 as well as objections from John Calhoun, James Buchanan, and J.M. Niles of Connecticut who as good Democrats wanted the notes issued without interest and therefore more plentiful in quantity though slightly inflated.

In New York, President Van nuren's home state, Ticknor witnessed the victorious election celebration of the Whigs who had just triumphed in the local elections. Not being on active duty Ticknor attached himself to the Naval Lyceum at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. At that time before the establishment of the Naval Academy in 1845, Naval Lyceums were established at Navy bases for the edification and improvement of the naval officers. The Lyceums included libraries, collections of naval literature, technical periodicals, and other facilities to increase officers' knowledge of their profession. Ticknor had hardly got settled at Brooklyn before he was ordered to a new post and he ends his journal.

In this and the following journals, the opening pages give a table of contents by chapter and each chapter usually begins with a resume of contents with page numbers, in order that the reader can find the specific accounts of the events related in this register.

Journal IV (1838-1842) relates the events of Ticknor's service as Fleet Surgeon with the Mediterranean Squadron commanded by Commodore Isaac Hull on the U.S.S. Ohio. Ticknor and Hull did not start out on the best of terms. Hull appropriated the wardroom of the Ohio for the use of himself and his wife, and consigned Ticknor and the other subordinate officers to the orlop deck which was below the waterline of the ship. The officers protested before leaving New York harbor, and to their complaint Ticknor added his medical opinion of the orlop deck's wretched conditions without first being consulted. Somehow the officer's complaint found its way into a Whig newspaper, and Hull suspected Ticknor of trying to be insubordinate. Relations between the two did not improve after the ship sailed to take its winter station at Minorca. Ticknor reported further instances of friction as the squadron visited Gibraltar, Lisbon, Marseilles, Leghorn, Elba, Naples, Malta, Athens, Smyrna, and Rome, where Ticknor had an audience with the Pope, "a kindly old gentleman in a white morning gown and slippers". Returning to Mahon, Minorca, in the fall of 1839 Hull lost patience with his subordinate officers. Ticknor and six other officers were sent home in disgrace for alleged insubordination and for being discourteous to Mrs. Hull.

Arriving home in Boston, Ticknor went to Washington and cleared himself with the Secretary of the Navy, James K. Paulding. Without any immediate assignment Ticknor visited West Point, and then traveled to New York City, Salisbury, and Michigan, returning to New York in 1841 as his brother Caleb lay dying. Soon afterward, President Harrison died and while in New York Ticknor devoted some lengthy notes in his journal to Tyler's two vetoes of a revived national bank bill passed by the Whigs.

The rest of the journal is about Ticknor's five remaining brothers, his sister, and his many relatives in New York City.

Journal V (1845-1848) describes Ticknor's service as Surgeon again with the Pacific Squadron aboard the U.S.S. Columbus under the command of Commodore James Biddle. One major purpose of the voyage was to convey an American envoy, Alexander H. Everett, to the Far East. Everett, however, fell sick very early in the trip and, on the advice of Ticknor and Henry A. Wise, the Consul at Rio de Janeiro, Everett left the ship, after
delegating his powers to Commodore Biddle. After stopping at Java and at Batavia, Biddle sailed to Canton and exchanged treaties with the Chinese. In contrast to Ticknor's earlier description of Macao, Hong Kong, and Canton in Journal II, this journal describes the desolation and stagnation of trade after England had invaded China to protect the opium trade in 1842. Rumors of war with Mexico and possible fighting with the English over Oregon prompted Biddle to leave Hong Kong. Cholera at Manila forced the ship to sea again, and Biddle sailed north again to the port of Amoy which had just been opened as a result of the Opium War, while Biddle visited Shanghai.

In July, 1846, Biddle decided to use the power that Edmund Roberts had not used in 1833, namely the power to conclude a commercial treaty with Japan, if possible. The two ships in Biddle's squadron sailed to (Yedda) Bay (now Tokyo Bay) and dropped anchor in the lower part closer to the sea than to the city. Immediately, the ships were surrounded by hundreds of boats and thousands of Japanese. The emperor's agents came aboard and agreed to supply the ships but refused to allow any landing. The Japanese agreed to send a letter from Biddle to the Emperor at Nagasaki. When no message came from the Emperor after a week of waiting, Ticknor reported that the Americans realized the stubbornness of their adversaries. A message was relayed to Biddle that the Emperor could not possibly allow the Americans to trade with Japan since no one except the Chinese and Dutch could do so. Needless to say, that answer was far from convincing. Biddle demanded to see the message. The Japanese agent refused. Biddle then was rowed over to the agent's ship but while attempting to board in order to see the message, a Japanese guard struck Biddle with a sword and the party retreated through the hordes of Japanese boats to the Columbus. The next day the Japanese towed the two American ships out of the harbor.

The other sources for this episode, except Biddle's own report, put the Americans in a bad light. The Japanese version and two memoirs by cabin boys on the Columbus give the impression that Biddle did not try hard enough and in Japanese eyes lost face by not protesting strongly enough against Japanese insults. Most modern scholars accept this view as expounded by Inazo Nitobe in the Annual Report of the American Historical Association in 1911. If Biddle had protested more strongly, Nitobe says, the Japanese would have opened the country to him. Ticknor, however, gives ample evidence that Biddle was an irascible man and did protest as strongly as he could, considering that the ships were surrounded by greater numbers and had not finished loading supplies. For this information Ticknor's journal seems to be highly significant.

The tiny fleet then sailed to Hawaii, where Ticknor reported on missionary activities there. The Columbus then went to Valparaiso and Lima, where news reached them that America and Mexico were at war, and that Biddle was to command the naval forces in California. At Monterey Biddle took over command from Captain W. B. Shubrick who had been trying to undo the damage which Commodore Stockton and Colonel John C. Fremont had done in antagonizing the natives and in thwarting the authorized military governor of California, General Stephen W. Kearney. This, of course, Ticknor's own viewpoint upon his arrival at San Francisco. Because the ship had been at sea for almost three years and because encouraging news arrived of American victories, Biddle left Shubrick in command and sailed home, touching briefly at Rio de Janeiro, thus completing their voyage around the world.

Journal VI (1848-1850) is not so adventurous as its predecessors. It begins with Ticknor making his report to the new Secretary of the Navy,
John Y. Mason. While at Washington, Ticknor visited Dolly Madison and was entertained at the White House by Mrs. Polk. Ticknor then journeyed by rail, canal, and stage toward Michigan but in Ohio he and his wife were injured when their coach overturned. Since Ticknor knew the driver was obviously drunk at the time, he sued the stage company. According to Ticknor, the medical evidence that he amassed in his case was a milestone for legal cases of that sort. In time he continued on to Michigan, only to be ordered back to Boston to be a Surgeon at the Navy Yard there under the command of his old associate Commodore Downes. Before assuming his duties, he was awarded $3500 damage in his lawsuit. At Boston, he reports hearing Edward Everett’s speech at Bunker Hill, lectures on hypnotism, and the news of President Taylor’s death.

Ticknor devotes quite a few pages to his own opinions on the celebrated Parkman-Webster murder trial. Dr. Webster had chopped up Dr. Parkman, his creditor. In most histories the case is given as an example of how flaming passions and sordid crimes could be hidden behind a Brahmin name. Ticknor’s comments, however, emphasize the legal and philosophical morals of the case. One of Webster’s defenses was that he could not be executed for first-degree murder since the crime he had committed was an act of passion or temporary insanity. Ticknor dismissed such a plea since, to him, if one’s passions gained the upper hand, then it was because one had allowed them to do so, and in allowing or consenting to the dominion of one’s passions over one’s natural reason, one in a sense designs and plans that the act of passion should happen; therefore, the crime is premeditated, and the charge should be murder. Ticknor’s view of original sin, and, since this thinking was incorporated in the state’s case and Chief Justice Shaw’s charge to the jury, Ticknor’s tedious remarks on the subject show the effects of the old moral philosophy of New England in one of its final and most spectacular phases.

The last remaining item of interest in Journal VI is Ticknor’s first, last, and only meeting with his celebrated cousin, George Ticknor, the publisher and literary scholar who promoted the cause of Germanic scholarship in America. Benajah suspected that the erudite and wealthy cousin would look down on his country cousins from Connecticut. Benajah was agreeably surprised when George seemed quite interested in the western branch of the family, and Benajah had to admit that, despite his wealth and genteel interests, George Ticknor was an “all right” fellow.

Journal VII (1851-1852) describes the last years of Ticknor’s service as Chief Surgeon at the Boston Navy Yard. The bulk of this unbound volume is devoted to family news, remarks on intemperance, and a trip to Michigan, where Ticknor himself was involved in another lawsuit which was decided against him. In 1852 he heard rumors that he was about to be assigned to a naval station on the coast of Africa but instead he received ordem to act as surgeon at the annual naval rendezvous at Boston. The Ticknor Journals end here.
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<td>Journal, Vol. II - A &amp; B revision with some narrative missing on Siam between Vol. II - B &amp; C, 250 pp.</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Journal, Vol. VI, 312 pp.</td>
<td>1845-1850</td>
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Series II. General Subject file

This series is divided into two major categories, the letterbook, 1844-52 and Writings.

**Letterbook, 1844-1852**

The letters in Ticknor's letterbook mainly concern health reports to his superior officers, correspondence, letters to the Navy Department, and pension certificates for naval personnel, 1844-1852. Some of the letters are from Ticknor to his lawyers concerning his lawsuit against the Ohio Stage Coach Company in 1849. The letterbook is prefaced with a table of contents, there is also an index pertaining to people and subjects in the letters. The Index list seem to have been compiled by Donald J. Warner, the donor of this collection and the grandson of Benajah Ticknor.

**Writings**

This subseries contains an essay on remarks concerning religious establishments. Though Ticknor's views on temperance, wealth, dancing, and the Sabbath are quite similar to the views held by Congregationalists of the period, he was in fact an Episcopalian. This essay attempts to show that the established Episcopal Church in England is not so bad as that of the Catholics and that the establishment of the Episcopal Church in America would have distinct benefits. The manuscript is dated October, 1835, from Boston.

Also in writing is Ticknor's analysis of "The State of Religion in America". A great deal of his remarks bemoan the decline of the religious energies of the nation through sectarianism and misplaced zeal of the major sects in getting new members rather than in promoting true religious feelings. He examines the Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians and the divisions within each group which have allowed religious apathy to flourish and which have allowed the Catholics to take over missionary work in the American West. In this regard Ticknor criticizes Lyman Beecher's "Pleas for the West" which was of course violently anti-Catholic. Ticknor says the meager state of Protestant missions in the West is due more to internal divisions than to the eternal pressure of the Catholics. The essay does provide some hints of two coincident but apparently unrelated events in the mid-1830's: the rise of Transcendentalism with its revolt against the older religious sects and the anti-Catholic agitation in Massachusetts. The essay is also unique, because, though written in Boston in 1835, it ignores almost completely the influence of the Unitarians.

The essay entitled "Mammon Punished", dated 1842, in New York is Ticknor's attempt to explain the causes of the great depression which began in 1837 and continued until the Mexican War. His essay is divided into four parts. The first three examine the successive roles of the Bank of the United States, private merchants, and corporations as causes of the depression. Ticknor's conclusion is that none of these elements were the real causes of the depression but, rather, the true cause lay in America's inordinate, greedy thirst after things of this world and that the depression was a just punishment of this materialistic spirit. The concluding part of this remarkable essay on religious economics is Ticknor's exhortation for America to rediscover true religion and enjoy the riches of the spiritual world.
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<td>Letterbook: copies of official letters and reports sent while a surgeon of the U. S. Navy, 196 pp.</td>
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<td>Diseases, an incomplete essay on diseases, pp. 51-54, 131-134</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Education, an incomplete essay on education. pp. 97-100,105-108</td>
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<td>Mammon Punished, 187 pp.</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Medical Symptoms and Cook's History of the Reformation, noted on, 27pp.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Murders, Suicides, Executions, list. of 6 pp.</td>
<td>1835 -1836</td>
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<td>Naval discipline, incomplete remarks on, 8 pp.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Observations on Physiology and Pathology (Cures),190 pp.</td>
<td>no date</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Quotations on Music, Woman, Luxury, etc., 23 pp.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Religious Establishments, 178 pp.</td>
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<td>Self-Indulgence, incomplete essay on, 43 pp.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>State of Religion in the United States, 88 pp.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>U.S.S. Peacock: General Health Report, 3 pp.</td>
<td>1832 -1833</td>
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The remaining foldets are mainly medical notes and random pages from unknown sources.
A Select List of the More Prominent People Who Appear in the Ticknor Journals, 1818-1852

The Roman numerals denote the Journal in which the person first appears.

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Bartlett, William H.C., 1809- , IV
Biddle, James, 1783-1848, V
Buchanan, James, 1791-1868, III
Burchard, Samuel D., 1812-1891, III
Calhoun, John C., 1782-1850, III
Carrera, Jose Miguel, 1785-1821, I
Cochrane, Thomas, 10th Earl of Dundonald, 1775-1860, I
Downes, John, 1784-1854, I
Everett, Alexander H., 1790-1847, V
Everett, Edward, 1794-1865, VI
Foltz, Jonathan M., 1810-1877, IV
Forbes, Robert B., 1804-1889, V
Fremont, John C., 1813-1890, V
Gansevoort, Guert, 1812-1867, IV
Geisinger, David, 1790-1860, II
Glynn, John, 1801-1871, III
Hardy, Sir Thomas Masterman, 1769-1839, I
Harrison, William Henry, 1773-1841, IV
Hill, Mrs. Frances M., 1807-1884, IV
Hull, Isaac, 1773-1843, III
Jarvis, James J., 1818-1888, V
Jones, Thomas ap Catesby, 1790-1858, III
Kearney, Stephen W., 1794-1848, V
Kent, James, 1763-1847, III
Madison, Dolly, 1768-1849, VI
Mason, John Y., 1799-1859, VI
Morrison, Dr. Charles, 1782-1834, II
Niles, J.M., 1787-1856, III
O'Higgins, Bernardo, 1776-1842, I
Paulding, James K., 1779-1860, III
Perry, Mathew Galbreath, 1794-1858, IV
Pickens, Francis W., 1805-1869, III
Polk, Mrs. Sarah C., 1803- , VI
Roberts, Edmund, 1784-1836, II
Rodgers, George Washington, 1787-1832, II
San Martin, Jose de, 1778-1850, I
Schroeder, Reverend, J. F., 1800-1857, III
Shubrick, William B., 1790-1874~ V
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