



Independence Seaport Museum

Guide to the Conner Family Papers

Creator: Susan Dillwyn Physick Conner and other members of her family

Dates: 1816-1903 (bulk 1832-56)

Quantity: 33 volumes and 3 folders

Call Phrase: Conner Family Papers

Provenance: Donated by Mrs. William H. Noble, Jr. ISM number: 1982.134

Processed by: Shaun Kirkpatrick

Scope and content: The Conner Family Papers consist primarily of 23 journals kept by Susan Dillwyn Physick Conner from 1832 to 1856. The collection also includes her unfinished autobiography with amendments by her son, a scrapbook she kept in her youth, two notebooks, two journals by her son, Philip Syng Physick Conner, one journal by Philip Conner's wife, Mary D. Lewis Conner, two letters (one by Mary Lewis, one by Philip Conner), three account books, two published books owned by Susan Physick Conner, and notes and drafts by Arthur Hale, Philip Conner's son-in-law.

Susan Conner's journal entries span from one year after her marriage to David Conner until her final entry ten days before her death at age 53. From 1832 to 1835, she made a journal entry nearly every day. In later years, she wrote more sporadically, but usually updated what had happened in the intervening period. Her lengthy entries discuss her family, including her husband David (first a naval captain, then commodore), her siblings Sarah (Sally) Physick Randolph and Philip Physick, her children Philip and Edward, and household matters, daily and social activities, and significant conversations. She most often wrote from her various homes in Philadelphia, at the family's summer estate Octorara, near Conowingo, Md., or at their winter retreat in St. Augustine, Fla.

Her journals from 1834-35 (v. 10-12) are notably different from the others, almost taking the form of a travelogue. During that time, she was sailing through the Mediterranean with her husband on his ship, the USS JOHN ADAMS. Her entries, therefore, were often less personal and more descriptive. Her 1843-48 journal (v. 15) is also noteworthy for its mentions of her husband's role as commander of the Gulf Squadron in the Mexican-

American War. Susan writes about the evils of slavery and her interactions with slaveholders in Georgia in her journal from 1853 (v. 19). Her final journal (v. 23) includes an “Addendum” written by her son Philip about her death and burial, as well as a general description about her physical appearance and personality.

Conner wrote a partial autobiography (v. 24) for her children, and described for them her older relatives and childhood memories. Among other things, she wrote about her parents’ unusual separation in 1815 (“My parents were not divorced but separated by mutual consent”), her sister’s elopement with Dr. Jacob Randolph in 1821, her first interactions with her own future husband David Conner in 1824, and her growing religious faith in 1826. Here her autobiography ends, but her son Philip includes an “Addendum” presenting a summary of the rest of her life. At the end of the volume are silhouettes of Philip Syng Physick, Elizabeth Emlen Physick, and Sarah Physick Randolph, and photographs of Samuel Emlen’s and Philip Syng Physick’s houses in Philadelphia (Samuel Emlen was the maternal grandfather of Susan Physick Conner).

Her scrapbook (v. 25) from her teenage years is the earliest item in the collection, and is filled primarily with newspaper clippings of poems, stories, anecdotes, and puns, dating from 1816 to 1823. Other pages have calculations, arithmetic, and problem-solving questions, presumably from Susan’s tutoring.

In her “Writing Book” (v. 27), Conner kept track of accounts and addresses. The book also has a few directions and Bible study notes. In her “Common-place Book (Poetry)” (v. 26), she composed several poems and hymns, mainly about her faith, between 1826 and 1827. The book also includes later poems written by her niece Elizabeth Randolph from 1834 to 1850.

Also included in the collection is an account book (v. 28) of Susan’s income after her husband’s death. Most of this book is unused, as Susan died in November of the same year as David.

David Conner’s account book (v. 35) kept track of his bank account in the Bank of North America, 1855-56. Most of the book is empty, as David died in March 1856.

Susan’s brother Philip kept an account book (v. 34) from 1831-35 for his farm near Germantown. His nephew Philip Conner eventually received the book and the farm, adding a list of fruit trees in 1861.

Philip Conner’s journals date from 1866 (v. 31) and 1868 (v. 32). He, like his parents, lived in Philadelphia and the estate at Octorara. He wrote about his social engagements, and the activities and health of his wife, Mary, and their children, Camilla and Edward. In v. 32, he also wrote about his brother Edward Conner’s 1868 lawsuit against the American Life Insurance Co. Philip’s letter (folder 2) is undated and unaddressed, but might have been written to son-in-law Arthur Hale around 1903. It describes his mother’s experiences on board the JOHN ADAMS, which Susan Physick Conner wrote about in

her 1834-35 journal (v. 10). In 1903, he apparently sent that journal to Hale, attaching a dated note inside about the high quality of his mother's writing.

Mary Lewis Conner, Philip Conner's wife, kept a journal from July to September 1860 (v. 33) about their wedding trip to Europe. Mary's letter of May 31, 1860 to Mrs. James Smith expresses hope that Smith will be able to attend their wedding in June.

Arthur Hale, the son-in-law of Philip Conner and husband of Camilla, hoped to turn excerpts from Susan Physick Conner's journals (v. 10-12) and autobiography (v. 24) into a book for publication. He took reference notes on his grandmother-in-law's work, typed excerpts under various titles, made photographs of the silhouettes and other relevant documents, and even drew or had drawn two detailed maps illustrating the JOHN ADAMS' voyage (folder 3).

Also included in the collection are the books *Hints to the Charitable* and *The Shadow of the Cross: An Allegory*, originally owned by Susan Conner.

Biographical note:

Susan Dillwyn Physick was born on June 22, 1803, in Philadelphia, the second of four children. Her parents were Elizabeth Emlen, whose family was one of the wealthiest in Philadelphia, and Philip Syng Physick, the prominent physician. When Susan was 12, her parents separated and she moved into her father's new home, the still-extant Physick House at 321 S. 4th Street. In 1824 she met naval Master-Commandant David Conner, and the two began a courtship.

In her early twenties, Susan took great interest in her religious faith and in poetry, two things that continued to reappear in her journals throughout the rest of her life. In 1826 she was confirmed into the Episcopal Church, and that same year began filling a commonplace book with her own poems and hymns.

Susan and David Conner married on June 25, 1828 and set up home in Philadelphia. In October 1829, Conner, now a captain, left to serve for 12 months in the Gulf of Mexico. Her earliest journal entries (actually loose sheets of paper) come from this time of "sorrow" (folder 1). After he returned, she described what for them was a normal day: "Capt. C[onner] works in his workshop – planes and saws – writes reads & draws – and takes long walks – and talks to me – I sew and read and keep house, and play on the guitar and take my Italian lesson" (v. 3). In a normal year, she and her husband spent much of the summer at the Physick country estate of Octorara, in Maryland, and the rest of the time at their home in Philadelphia.

In January 1833, Susan and David traveled south for the winter, stopping in Charleston, S.C., but spending most of their time in the early resort town of St. Augustine, Fla. They enjoyed themselves and returned the following winter, 1833-34.

In May 1834, David requested that the Department of the Navy allow his wife to travel with him on his next assignment, the JOHN ADAMS. The Navy consented, and they sailed for the Mediterranean in August. Susan recorded the ship's stops at many ports in southern Spain, France and Italy. The possibility of war with France at this time created some concern, but once the threat subsided, David left the service in September 1835, and he and Susan visited France and England before returning to Philadelphia in December.

Susan gave birth to her first child, Philip Syng Physick Conner, on May 14, 1837. Her journals reveal that for the rest of the year she worried about "Philly," who had colic, and her father, who had been ill for some time and finally died on December 15, at the age of 70.

In 1839, the family again traveled to England. However, Philly fell ill on the voyage, and doctors recommended he be taken "to the sun shine" (v. 14), so the Conners moved on to France, spending a month there, then heading for home in August. By March 1840, they had returned to Philadelphia, where Susan gave birth to her second child, Edward ("Eddy") on March 29.

In July 1841, David was appointed a Navy Commissioner and bought a house in Washington. Susan and her sons spent most of their time at Octorara until November 1843, when David received orders to command the Home Squadron in the Gulf of Mexico. He bought a new house in Philadelphia, at 4th and Walnut Streets, where Susan, Philly, and Eddy lived by August 1844.

By 1845, David Conner was promoted to commodore, and was called for duty when the United States declared war on Mexico the following year. Susan kept track of her husband's action in the newspapers (see clippings included in v. 15). David returned home in 1847 after the victory at Vera Cruz. In the winter of 1847-48, the family again went to St. Augustine, Fla., where Susan received word of her brother Philip Physick's and her brother-in-law Jacob Randolph's deaths, both in February 1848. She included Philip's obituary at the end of her 1848 journal (v. 15).

In 1850, the family again traveled to Europe, primarily touring England and Scotland. In December 1851, back in Philadelphia, Eddy fell deathly ill with scarlet fever, but survived. Susan wrote of a "great deal" (v. 19) of small pox and scarlet fever in the city that winter. The following winter, the family went back to St. Augustine, this time via Savannah. In the summer of 1854, the family vacationed in Ephrata, Pa. They planned to continue on to the Alleghenies, but David was too exhausted from the journey to Ephrata to go further.

David was apparently sick during much of his remaining life, especially in the winters of 1854-55 and 1855-56. In March 1856, already described by his wife as thin and feeble, David contracted pneumonia and died on March 20. Susan was devastated by his death, and clung to hope in a prediction that the "second Advent" of Christ would occur at

Pentecost that year. When it did not, she became “very sick” and “disappointed” (v. 23). Though always described by her son as a frail person, by July she grew extremely so, weighing only 78 pounds. Her doctors advised that she sail for Europe to recuperate, which she did in September, accompanied by her sons. The journey did not have its intended effect, however, and Susan Conner died on November 30, 1856, in Torquay, Devon, England. She was buried at South Laurel Hill in Philadelphia.

Philip Syng Physick Conner, her son, took possession of her journals and other books, many of which he would annotate between 1875-1903. He married Mary D. Lewis in June 1860, and in July they embarked on a long wedding trip to Europe. In 1861, Mary gave birth to their first child, Camilla (“Milly”), and on October 21, 1864, Edward (“Neddy”) was born. Philip apparently inherited Octorara, where his family lived. They often spent their winters with Mary’s parents at 526 Walnut St. in Philadelphia. Philip did not appear to have a vocation, but spent most of his time with his children or with Mary at parties, shows, and other social events in the city. He took lessons in Latin and in vocal music, and enjoyed hunting. He also supported the popular movement for Irish independence.

Camilla Conner married Arthur Hale in 1889. Hale later took a great interest in Susan Physick Conner’s journals, and attempted to publish excerpts from her 1834-35 journals and autobiography in book form under the title, “A Lady on a Man of War” (folder 3). Hale died in 1939, without success in his efforts.

Series List

Series 1. Susan Dillwyn Physick Conner

Box 1, Folder 1. Journal pages, 1829 – 1830

Volume 1. Journal, 1832

Volume 2. Journal, 1832

Volume 3. Journal, 1832

Volume 4. Journal, 1833

Volume 5. Journal, 1833

Volume 6. Journal, 1833

Volume 7. Journal, 1833-1834

Volume 8. Journal, 1834

Volume 9. Journal, 1834

Volume 10. Journal, 1834-1835, with notes by Philip Syng Physick Conner, 1903

Volume 11. Journal, 1835

Volume 12. Journal, 1835

Volume 13. Journal, 1836-1839

Volume 14. Journal, 1839-1843

Volume 15. Journal, 1843-1848

Volume 16. Journal, 1848

Volume 17. Journal, 1849-1850

Volume 18. Journal, 1850-1851
 Volume 19. Journal, 1851-1853
 Volume 20. Journal, 1853
 Volume 21. Journal, 1853-1855
 Volume 22. Journal, 1855-1856
 Volume 23. Journal, 1856, with "Addendum" by Philip Syng Physick Conner, 1876
 Volume 24. "Mrs. Conner's Autobiography," c. 1830's-50's, with notes by Philip
 Syng Physick Conner, 1875-1893
 Volume 25. "Scrap-Book," c. 1816-1823

Volume 26. "Common-place Book (Poetry)," 1826-1827, with later poems by Elizabeth
 Randolph, 1834-1850
 Volume 27. "Writing Book," c. 1841-1851
 Volume 28. Account book, 1856

Series 2. David Conner

Volume 29. Account book, 1855-1856

Series 3. Philip Physick

Volume 30. Account book, 1831-1835, with notes by Philip Syng Physick Conner, 1861

Series 4. Philip Syng Physick Conner

Volume 31. Journal, 1866
 Volume 32. Journal, 1868
 Box 1, Folder 2. Letter, n. d.

Series 5. Mary Lewis Conner

Volume 33. Journal, 1860
 Box 1, Folder 2. Letter, 1860

Series 6. Arthur Hale

Box 1, Folder 3. Notes and drafts, c. 1900-1930

Books

Hints to the Charitable (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1846).
 W. Adams. *The Shadow of the Cross: An Allegory*, 7th ed. (New York: General
 Protestant Episcopal Sunday School Union, 1851).