Dwight manuscripts. Rare historical documents are exhibited by the Society of the sons of the revolution. Interesting collection shown this afternoon at the rooms of the Boston art club by a member. [Reprint from Boston Transcript Tuesday, May 2, 1905].

Boston Transcript

TUESDAY, MAY 2, 1905

DWIGHT MANUSCRIPTS

Rare Historical Documents Are Exhibited

By the Society of the Sons of the Revolution

Interesting Collection Shown This Afternoon

At the Rooms of the Boston Art Club by a Member

Under the auspices of the Sons of the Revolution, and by courtesy of the Boston Art Club, the galleries of the club will be opened at three o'clock this afternoon for an exhibition of selections from the Dwight collection of historical manuscripts and broadsides, the exhibition to remain open until ten o'clock this evening. The manuscripts, broadsides, etc., number more than 200 pieces, and are the property of R. Henry W. Dwight, the president of the Sons of the Revolution in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Mr. Dwight is not a collector in the ordinary sense of the word, and has never been a frequenter of the auction-room for rarities, but in the last few years he has gathered a great many documents relating to such matters as concerned the history of Berkshire County in the Revolution, and many other matters which either have some relation to the Dwight family genealogy or to the history of the stirring events of more than a century ago. By continually picking up what might by many be considered trifles, he has secured an interesting mass of material, and the exhibition at the Art Club shows only a part of this material, which will surely be of interest to future generations. There is a lack of unity in such a collection, to be sure, but it contains a foundation upon which a harmonious and comprehensive collection can be built.

The Dwight collection, as shown at the Art Club, is notable particularly for the large number of documents relating to the early history of Berkshire County and western Massachusetts, and for the Indian documents which related to the Stockbridge Indians. There are interesting documents signed relating to Colonial or Revolutionary matters and bearing the names of Thomas Gage, the
last colonial governor of Massachusetts; John Hancock, the first governor under the new régime, after the interregnum of the council; Governor Shirley and Governor Bernard of the Colonial line; Samuel Adams, James Bowdoin, Governor Gore, James Madison; Perez Hamlin, the hero of Bellamy's “Duke of Stockbridge;” General Joseph Dwight, Elijah Williams, Sir William Pepperill, Rev. E. W. Dwight, Governor Levi Lincoln, Nathaniel Willis and his son, N. P. Willis; William H. Seward, President Arthur, Caleb Strong and others. The autographs form an interesting collection alone.

It is not the mere signatures, however, that give interest to many of these papers. The commission signed by Governor Gage, for instance, is engraved by Nathaniel Hurd, the best of our Colonial engravers, probably the first in this country to engrave on copper. He it was who cut and engraved the seal of Harvard College. Another rare piece of engraving is the Broadside of 1803 with a portrait of President Adams in the centre, surrounded by frames in which the thirteen States, with their populations, are enumerated. This is a specimen of the work of Amos Doolittle, whose engravings of Washington have brought remarkable prices in auction sales. There are also engravings made in Holland, representing King (now State) street in the pre-Revolutionary period, and also showing Boston harbor. The houses in both of these scarce engravings are of the Dutch type, and the prints are colored by hand.

Of the historical papers which relate to the early history of Western Massachusetts, the most interesting to many are the Stockbridge Indian deeds and papers. There is a considerable collection of these, some of the Indian deeds bearing the dates of 1762-3-6 and 1768. There are also receipts and other documents signed by Indian proprietors, one being a lease of land to Elijah Williams for 500 years, and another bearing the signature of Solomonnhaunnaunwauharnet, who, doubtless, was called “Sol.” for short by the early settlers of Stockbridge.

Many papers illustrate vividly the customs and manners of the times. Among these are slave bills of sale in Berkshire County in 1750 and 1758; a lease, detailing her garments, of a Negress to Elijah Williams, 1778; a Negro bill of sale of 1766; a warrant of arrest for hitching up a horse on the Lord's Day, 1800; another for the arrest of a person for using profane language giving the details of the cost to the swearer; a part of the manuscript of a colonial song book; papers relating to lotteries; Boston apprenticeship indentures of 1784, showing the names of famous old Bostonians, and many other documents which shed light upon the life of the Revolutionary period.

The name of Elijah Williams is a well-known one in Berkshire County, and the documents relating to him form an interesting lot. He was suspected of being a Tory, and to prove his allegiance he carried in his pocket for two years a certificate signed by the selectmen in 1776 to show his entire loyalty to American liberty. Despite this he was arrested and put in Northampton jail in 1777. In 1778 we find a letter from him complaining of his confinement in “Boston Gaol” for being wrongly considered
a Tory, and there are later petitions for release, together with the final order releasing him from confinement. In connection with this matter is shown a Revolutionary oath of allegiance signed by about a hundred of the most prominent men of Berkshire County, and there are Tory oaths of allegiance taken prior to the Revolution, together with an interesting anti-Jacobite oath signed by most of the leading men of Berkshire.

The broadsides form one of the most interesting parts of the Dwight collection. Among these are Thomas Paine's song to the tune of “Anacreon in Heaven,” that piece of drivel from which the tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner” was taken, the title being “Adams and Liberty”; the rare broadside, “A Picturesque View of the State of Great Britain for 1780,” in which is a distant view of New York, with Arnold and Clinton, while in the foreground the colonists are represented as cutting off the horns of a cow which other colonies are milking. There is the Williamstown Committee of Safety broadside of Feb. 13, 1776, signed by J. Warren, Speaker, and Perez Morton, deputy secretary. Another broadside is a speech of Cadwalder Colden, the historian of the “Five Indian Nations,” Jan. 13, 1775. Another broadside represents war with Great Britain as imminent, although it was printed at Northampton in 1808. There is the broadside calling for the Massachusetts census of 1776, and other broadsides which refer to the enumeration of 1784. Another announces “A Course of Experiments on the Newly Discovered Electrical Fire,” by Ebenezer Kinnersley, to be given in Faneuil Hall in September, 1751. Professor Kinnersley announces that he will show “An Artificial Spider animated by the Electrical Fire so as to Act like a live One.” He was a friend of Franklin, and head master of the College of Philadelphia from 1753 to 1773.

It is impossible to enumerate the whole collection, which includes, besides letters mentioned, many others of special interest, early newspapers, maps of Boston and New York in 1838, early historical papers relating to shipping and mercantile matters, etc. Some of the letters are of genealogical and family interest, while others touch upon national concerns of moment. As a whole they are of a nature to attract anyone interested in the history of our country, and they may serve to show the importance of preserving such papers, which at the time appear to be of little consequence, but which, in after years, become exceedingly scarce and valuable.