

On the Importance of Archival Perseverance: The Mss. of William Jenks's *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom*



This story properly begins first with the *absence* of one footnote, and then the *presence* of another. It is the years-long tale of archival research to (re)locate the original manuscript of William Jenks's 1808 essay *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom*. Using this search as a case study, I will discuss the broad importance of long-term persistence while engaged in archival research, and offer what I hope are some useful strategies for overcoming certain apparent dead ends and brick walls.

In the Summer 2010 issue of the *Journal of the Early Republic*, Ed White's edited version of *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* was published, to accompany his excellent article "The Ends of Republicanism." The *Memoir*, published in late 1808 at Boston, purports to be a historical narrative written in 1872 and published in 1901 at the city of Quebec. To be very—and unjustly—brief, it is a critique of Jefferson's commercial policies as a counterfactual history in which the United States have broken up into a French-controlled imperial South; a north which has combined with Canada and is ruled by a British viceroy; and the Illinois Republick, the last remaining bit of democratic government on the continent.

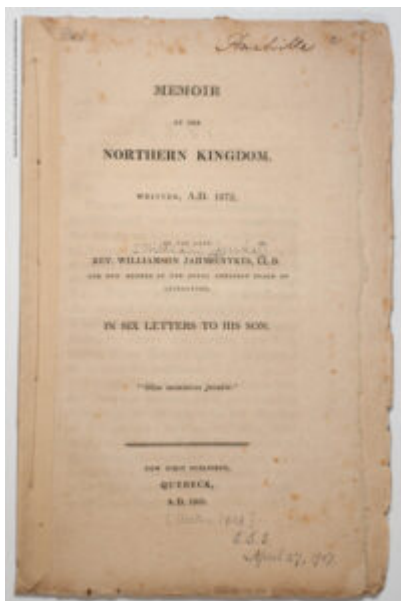


Figure 1: Title page of the *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* (Boston: Ferrand & Mallory, 1808). Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The fifth letter of the *Memoir* comprises the author's history of the New

England region, and what immediately caught my attention as I read was this quote: “Had that valuable library of domestick history, collected by the friends and associates of Belknap and Minot, survived the troubles of civil war, it would have been needless for me to leave you any hints of the antient history of New England.”

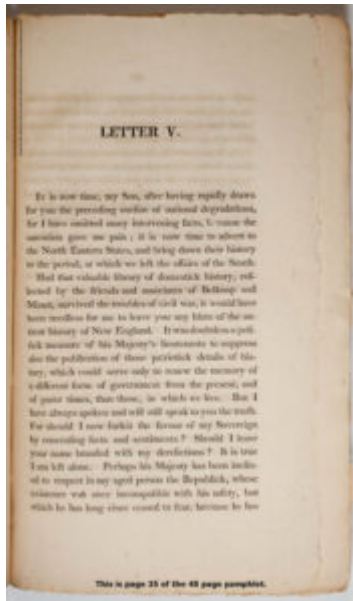


Figure 2: Letter V of the *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* mentions Jeremy Belknap and George Richards Minot. William Jenks, *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* (Boston: Ferrand & Mallory, 1808), 35. Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

I was at the time an Assistant Reference Librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and was reading the *Memoir* while sitting in the reading room of the very “valuable library of domestick history” mentioned in the text. Jeremy Belknap and George Richards Minot were two of the Society’s key founders and early donors. And here we get to the absence of a footnote. Had there been one, outlining the reference to the MHS, that probably would have been the end of this whole thing. I would have kept reading and moved on. But because there wasn’t, I thought this tiny little reference would make an interesting post for the MHS blog, which I ultimately ended up titling [“If only MHS had ‘survived the troubles of civil war.’”](#)

It helped that just a couple floors above me in the stacks were more than fifty boxes of the papers of the author of the *Memoir*, the Reverend William Jenks. A 1797 graduate of Harvard, Jenks was active in historical, charitable, and religious organizations in Massachusetts and Maine, taught at Bowdoin College, served as the MHS librarian for nine years, and studied and wrote widely on numerous topics of antiquarian, historical, linguistic, and religious interest. So I thought it would surely be worth looking through the papers to see what I could find there that related to the *Memoir*. I also did a quick JSTOR search, which brings me to the *presence* of the second footnote: my search returned an article by Harold S. Jantz: “German Thought and Literature in New England,

1620-1820: A Preliminary Survey," in the January 1942 issue of the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, which I thought quite an unlikely source.



Figure 3: Pastor Pendleton's Lithography, Rev. Wm. Jenks, D.D. Pastor of Green Street Church, Boston (Boston: s.n., ca. 1830). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.*

In Jantz's footnote 114, about Jenks's work on a translation of a German poem, he writes "As yet I have found no further mention of Jenks's translation of the *Messiah*. His papers at the MHS include nothing earlier than the manuscript of his extraordinary fantasy of the future, *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* (1808)." Oooh, I remember thinking, the manuscript of *Memoir* is just upstairs, that will be fun to have a look at, and maybe I can get a picture from it with which to illustrate the blog post. Little did I know. . . .

In spare moments over the next couple weeks or so, I began looking through the Jenks papers, drawing on the basic but perfectly thorough and accurate guide to the collection created in 1985 when the papers were rehoused (I must note here that the wonderful MHS collections staff have since reprocessed the William Jenks Family Papers and posted an even more thorough [online guide](#)).

Unfortunately, Jenks's diary for 1808 is missing (if you know where it is, please let me know), but his 1809 diary volume was present, as were many folders of dated correspondence, and a letterbook containing copies of much of his outgoing correspondence for the years 1806 through 1811. Among the relevant things I found there were the fascinating text of the letter Jenks anonymously sent to the Boston publishers of the *Memoir*, in which he outlines precisely how he wants it to appear, gives ideas for publicity, and even suggests that "if it should prove sufficiently advantageous to you, & should bring in more than might be necessary to defray your expenses & give you a comfortable profit, you would, in such case, deposit a sum, of whatever amount beyond \$100 you please, with the Selectmen of the town of Boston, to be awarded to the writer of the

best 'Essay on the best means of perpetuating the Federal compact of the United States of America.'" (Incidentally, this scheme very likely went unrealized, as there is a newspaper advertisement for a December 14, 1811 sheriff's sale of the publisher's stock, at which 532 copies of the *Memoir* in sheets were sold off at auction, probably destined to be used as wastepaper).

I also found Jenks's diary entry for the day on which he received the first printed copies of his pamphlet and its first review, which appeared in the December 1808 issue of Boston's *Monthly Anthology*. "The reading of these," he wrote on January 21, 1809, "& the several readings & reflections consequent upon them & connected with them banished from my mind those pious efforts, to which alone I had before attended. The world, literary refutations, scientific labor, & learned research became again interesting."



Figure 4: Massachusetts Historical Society was founded in 1791 by Jeremy Belknap, George Richards Minot, and others. Daderot, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

What I did *not* find, though, was the manuscript of *Memoir*. I wrote up the blog post without it, and published that on December 22, 2010, just a few days before leaving the MHS to take up a new job. But that footnote continued to bug me. Without it, again, I probably would have just assumed that the manuscript had been sent to the printers and not returned, and that no manuscript copy existed. But Jantz reported that he'd seen it, in 1942. So where had it gone? From December 2010 through May 2016, whenever I was in Boston, I returned to the MHS and spent some time with the Jenks papers, looking through a few boxes each time. Since I hadn't found *Memoir* in the likely places based on the finding guide, I began going systematically, folder by folder, through the fifty boxes, more than a few of which still at that time contained bundles of Jenks's many sermons inside, wrapped in wastepaper exactly as they had been when deposited at the library.

I went through the entire collection at least three times, first forwards, then backwards, and then again somewhat in a random order. I examined the several smaller collections of William Jenks's papers acquired at different times. I talked to the Curator of Manuscripts, who I knew had files in her office relating to the acquisition of many of the manuscript collections, and we looked through those to see if maybe some pieces of the Jenks papers had been removed by the family after 1942. We learned then that various tranches of the papers had been deposited by Jenks's heirs at different times, though there was no indication about which parts came at which time. But there was nothing to indicate that any relevant material had been removed.

By 2016 I was getting fairly sick of this search, to be honest. I had other things I needed to be using my infrequent MHS research time for, and we had the text of the *Memoir* in published form, so what did it really matter about the manuscript anyway? But the question kept gnawing away at me: what had Jantz seen, and where was it? I still wanted to find the answer, or at the very least to confirm one way or the other whether the *Memoir* manuscript was in the MHS collections.

On Tuesday, May 10, in Boston to give an entirely unrelated talk, I spent the morning strategically calling up boxes and looking carefully through them. Still nothing. I went to lunch with my friends from the collections department, and asked the curator then if I could come upstairs after lunch and have another look through her office files to see if I had overlooked a clue when I examined them some years prior. And that last look through the curatorial files was what made me rethink my whole process and start looking at it crossways. It was unclear at which point some of the papers had been deposited at the library, so . . . what if *none* of the fifty boxes of what we knew as the Jenks Papers were at the MHS when Jantz had done his research in the early 1940s? I had thought that at least some portion of them were, but perhaps that was completely wrong. If so, then it was back to square one, since I had already looked at all of the items cataloged under William Jenks's name in the MHS collections.

I turned next to the many volumes of the MHS *Proceedings*, shelved along the walls of the library's reference room. They are an invaluable resource for many things, but I wasn't at all sure that they would help me. I started looking through the several index volumes for references to Jenks, and in the 1928 index to the third series of *Proceedings*, there appeared a reference to certain papers of William Jenks, on the first page of Volume 55. That led me to the minutes of the Society's October 13, 1921 meeting, at which the Librarian "reported the following accessions: From the family of Rev. Henry F. Jenks, through his brother Charles W. Jenks, of Bedford, Mass., the manuscript papers of Rev. William Jenks, of his son John Henry Jenks, and of his grandson Rev. Henry F. Jenks, from 1800 to 1903." The papers were a bit more fully described, though there is no specific mention of the *Memoir*.

PROCEEDINGS

OF 1921

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

OCTOBER MEETING, 1921.

THE stated meeting was held on Thursday, the 13th instant, at three o'clock, P.M.; the first Vice-President, Mr. RANSOM, in the chair.

The record of the last meeting was read and approved. The Librarian reported the following accessions:

From the family of Rev. Henry F. Jenks, through his brother Charles W. Jenks, of Bedford, Mass., the manuscript papers of Rev. William Jenks, of his son John Henry Jenks, and of his grandson Rev. Henry F. Jenks, from 1800 to 1903. The collection contains interesting papers relating to the Church in Brattle Square, to the publishing work of John Henry Jenks, and of his successor, Jenks & Palmer, showing letters from S. G. Goodrich ("Peter Parley"), R. B. Thomas, S. A. Godey, G. S. Hillard, Edward Everett, Rufus Choate, Mrs. George Ripley, and Nicholas Vingren, of Brook Farm, George Bancroft, and others. With these papers are the letter-book of Jeremiah Fish, 1811-1822, a list of failures in Boston in 1826-1827, and a number of pamphlets, maps and broadsides.

From Mrs. Archibald Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., letters received by William Everett from his sister Charlotte Brooks Everett (Mrs. Henry A. Wise) and from others, 1826 to 1903.

From Miss Josephine MacChord Shaw, additional papers of Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw and Samuel S. Shaw, 1761-1908, and the diary of Mrs. John Oakes Shaw, kept in interleaved old Farmer's Almanacs, 1820 to 1879.

From Miss Annie Bradford, of Philadelphia, a number of manuscript papers of her grandfather Samuel Bradford, United States Marshal for the Massachusetts District, running from 1760 to 1797; and a sermon preached at his death in September, 1818.

Figure 5: "October Meeting, 1921" in the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. 55, The Society, 1923, 1. Digital image, [Google Books](#).

Back to the online catalog, then, where I entered Henry F. Jenks as an author, and pulled up the record for the collection referenced in the *Proceedings*. No mention of William at all, except as included in "and family" in the scope note. But as soon as I saw the first date in the title field, 1808, my fingers started tingling. This *must* be it, surely. I requested the boxes through the online portal, and gave fair warning to my former colleagues staffing the reading room that I might well make more noise than is typically allowed if my hunch proved correct. They had all heard me going on at length about this manuscript for years, by that point, so they well understood how excited I was that it might finally reveal itself. And reveal itself it very much did. As could only be expected from the fact that it was the first date on the collection, the manuscript version of *Memoir* seen by Jantz was the very first document in the very first folder in the very first box.



Figure 6: First page of the manuscript of *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* in the Henry F. Jenks Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

While I didn't exactly whoop in the reading room, I most definitely came close. It had been there the whole time, just a few feet away from the main body of Jenks's papers, waiting for me to hit upon the key that would unlock the mystery: that 1928 volume of the *Proceedings*. Once I had alerted the catalogers, they were able to update the online records and finding guides for the various Jenks family collections to note the presence of the manuscript, and they have since mounted a hi-resolution digital version on the [MHS website](#).

While the manuscript of *Memoir* differs in no substantial way from the published version, I have no regrets about spending the time I did trying to locate it. Being able at last to fit that missing piece back into the Jenks puzzle was a profoundly satisfying experience, and the strategies and techniques I used throughout have served me well even as I have moved on to other projects and different mysteries. Archival perseverance paid off, in the end.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Ed White for bringing the *Memoir* to my attention, and to Brenda M. Lawson, Kathy Griffin, Nancy Heywood, Laura Lowell, Susan Martin, and Peter K. Steinberg at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Portions of this paper were given as a talk at the biennial meeting of the Society of Early Americanists in 2019; thanks also to my colleagues on that panel Vera Keller, Sandra Dahlberg, and Anne Baker. Additional thanks to antiquarian booksellers Garrett Scott and Brian Cassidy, who have both shared my interest in *Memoir* from the beginning.

Further Reading

Ed White's edited version of *Memoir of the Northern Kingdom* is in *Journal of*

the Early Republic 30 (Summer 2010), 301-31. His accompanying article, "The Ends of Republicanism," appears earlier in the same issue, on pages 179-99.

The author's copy of the original edition of *Memoir* is scanned and available on the [Internet Archive](#).

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