

THE ACCOUNT AND LEDGER BOOKS OF SIMEON BUTTON, JUSTICE OF THE PEACE AND MERCHANT IN EARLY PITTSTOWN 1794 - 1855

The volumes consists of three elements: the account book of early Pittstown merchant Simeon Button from the years 1794-1831; the fragmented business records of Simeon's son Limon (Lyman) from the years 1829-55; and, of greatest historical interest, the justice of the peace records of Simeon Button from the years 1792-1810.

The microfilmed document is available at the New York State Library in Albany *Account and ledger books of Simeon Button, Pittstown, N.Y., 1792-1821* (New York State Library call number 974.741 P692 200-14249). But the microfilmed copy is of poor quality. Most recently (2008), the Pittstown Historical Society (PHS) has digitalized the original manuscripts (which are held in the Button family) and given a copy to the NYS Library.

While the Account and ledger books, which number over 500 pages, are too lengthy to include on the PHS website, a copy of the index is posted. The index has been produced by Dr. Ronald Bachman of Falls Church, Virginia. Bachman, who had been researching his ancestors in Pittstown, examined the document on microfilm at the NYSL and concluded that the source was potentially valuable but unusable without an enhanced finding aid. He undertook to complete an every-name index to the Button ledgers containing roughly 1,200 entries.

The Button account book provides insights into the relative value of physical labor, legal services, farm commodities, implements, household goods, and clothing in late 18th-/early 19th -century rural New York before the establishment of a standard national currency. Although account balances were maintained in the inherited English system of pounds, shillings, and pence, relatively little money changed hands, as local commerce primarily was barter-based. Debts were offset by labor and/or delivery of other goods to the creditor. In some cases, a debtor would hire out his minor children or trade the labor of a slave to balance out his account.

Since Simeon Button was both a merchant/trader and the town's justice of the peace in the late 1700s and early 1800s, he had dealings with nearly all the early residents of Pittstown, and his records are information rich.

Much of the justice of the peace ledger, especially toward the end of Button's tenure, concerns the settlement of suits brought by creditors against delinquent debtors. For example, local merchants Thomas Rattoone & Co. and Michael S. Vandercook & Co. repeatedly had to file suits to collect what was owed them. Often the settlements allowed for "payment by installments." In virtually all such cases, the justice of the peace ruled in favor of the plaintiff, frequently without the defendant even making a "court" appearance. Of greater human interest are the descriptions of misdemeanors such as the willful destruction of property, assault, and theft (typically involving livestock). In the early years of his tenure, Button described these cases in colorful detail, including information on the local residences that served as courtrooms, the names of jurors and "half jurors,"

the verdicts and penalties. Later, it appears that misdemeanor cases were no longer being tried in Pittstown, as Button then described only routine debt-settlement cases. Finally, of special interest to genealogists, Button listed about twenty marriages he had performed as justice of the peace, identifying the bride and groom and the date of marriage. It is likely that most of these marriages are not documented in any other source. A list of the marriages is provided below.

Although the Button ledger does contain a few historically prominent surnames, such as Van Rensselaer, Knickerbacker, and Ten Broeck, most of the individuals were ordinary folk. The names most frequently appearing, aside from Simeon and Limon Button themselves, are those of constables hired to serve warrants and bring defendants to trial, e.g., Thomas Daggett, Gilbert Eddy, Lewis Keeler, William Ketchum, and the owners of houses that served as courtrooms, e.g., Edward Rawson, John Tarbell, Herman Van Veghten. The attorney Neal McNeal also receives frequent mention. Other names appearing most often (each with seven or more occurrences) as litigants or on jury lists include John Crab, Joseph Deleverge, William Douglass, Robert and Tisdale Eddy, Henry, Isaac, and John Filkin, Jeremiah, John, Thomas and Levy Francisco, Steven Gaston, Levy Gould, George Hoffman, Abijah and Daniel Ketchum, Joseph Klein, Shubael Lewis, Solomon Lockwood, John Mandeville, James McClung, John Merrill, Samuel Miller, John Moon, Jesse Morris, Michael Overacker, Oliver and Stanton Prentiss, William Redner, Jeremiah Reynolds, Joseph Robinson, Francis Romyne, Christopher Sawyer, Caleb Sherman, Cornelius Smith, Jacob Stover, Thomas Turner, Manuel Van Allen, Henry S., Michael S. and Simon Vandercook, John Vanderspiegel, Leonard Wager, John Weatherwax, Gilbert and Thomas P. Williams, Ebenezer Wilson, and Phinehas Wright.