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## Hidden Beneath: Watermarks in the Early American Document Collection

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# Hidden Beneath: Watermarks in the Early American Document Collection

## **Abstract**

This summer, as the Smith Intern at Special Collections, I was tasked with working on a hodge-podge of assembled documents, previously referred to as the “18th Century Document” collection. The box’s contents had been around for just about as long as anyone could remember, and really only got exposure for the Revolutionary War classes that had class sessions through Special Collections. Yet, as I browsed through the collection (which was really a small assemblage of papers), the box was much more than a Revolution collection. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Diane Werley Smith Internship, Special Collections, College Archive

## **Disciplines**

Archival Science | Library and Information Science

## **Comments**

The Interns at Gettysburg College’s Musselman Library captured their internship experiences since the spring of 2011. Over time the blog has featured Fortenbaugh, Smith, and Holley interns. They shared updates on semester long projects, responded to blogging prompts, and documented their individual intern experience.

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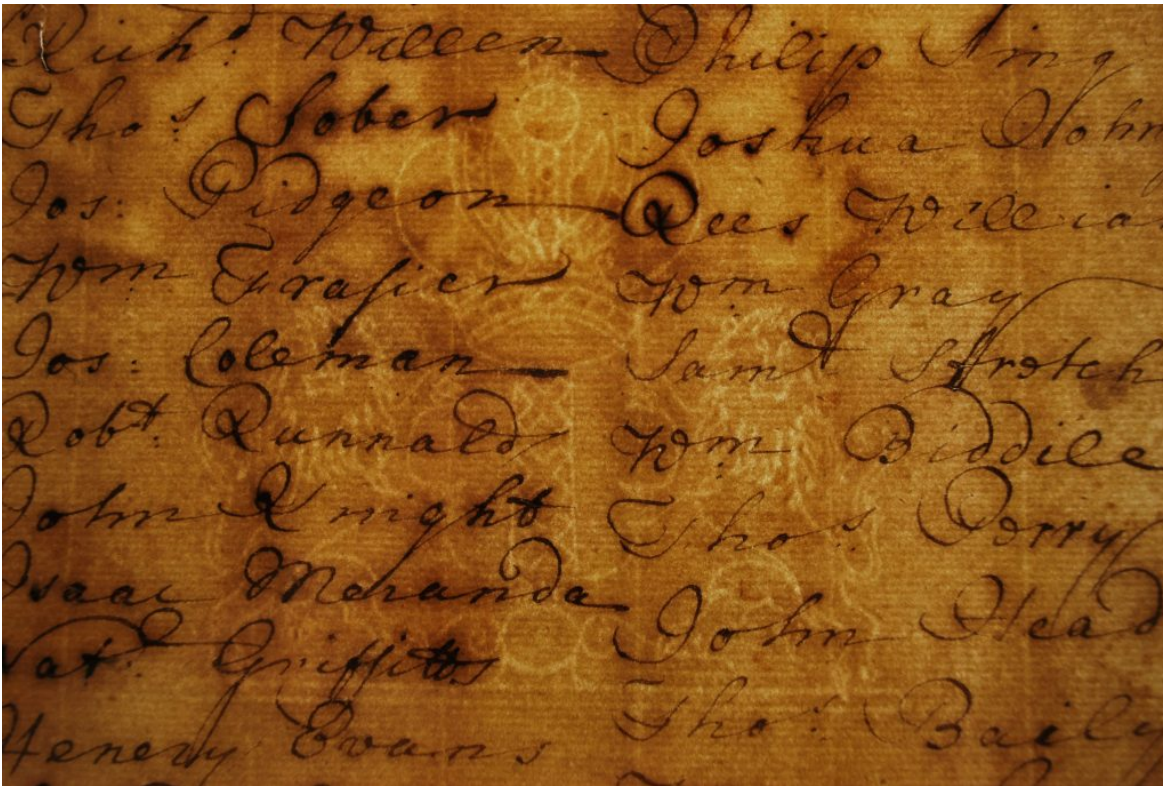
## Hidden Beneath: Watermarks in the Early American Document Collection

July 22, 2016

By: Tyler Black '17

This summer, as the Smith Intern at Special Collections, I was tasked with working on a hodge-podge of assembled documents, previously referred to as the "18th Century Document" collection. The box's contents had been around for just about as long as anyone could remember, and really only got exposure for the Revolutionary War classes that had class sessions through Special Collections. Yet, as I browsed through the collection (which was really a small assemblage of papers), the box was much more than a Revolution collection. In fact, a fair portion of the documents came from the colonial era, with a surprising amount from 1720's Philadelphia. When I say hodge-podge, it truly was so: some letters, court records, survey manuscripts, other administrative documents, etc. It needed some love, but I was very pleased to be working with such a breed of tangible history. I dove into my project, trying to read the colonial script (with varying success) and getting a grasp on the content. And then I showed the documents to Mary, our lovely conservator, to tell me more about the condition of the documents. After all, they were quite aged and appeared so. She held the document up to the lamp, as if by habit, and asked if I had seen the beautiful watermarks on the manuscript, to which I responded with a drawn-out "...what".

Suddenly, a whole new dimension opened up within the collection. I vaguely knew of watermarks, but would have never thought to seek them out. Thankfully, Mary did. So my next few days were rather occupied with researching these watermarks: trying to identify their maker, the source of the papermill, why they chose that design, who these people were....there were so many questions unanswered, and more questions contributed by Mary's daily guidance.



Coat of Arms of  
Amsterdam, Early  
American Document  
Collection, Special  
Collections at  
Gettysburg College

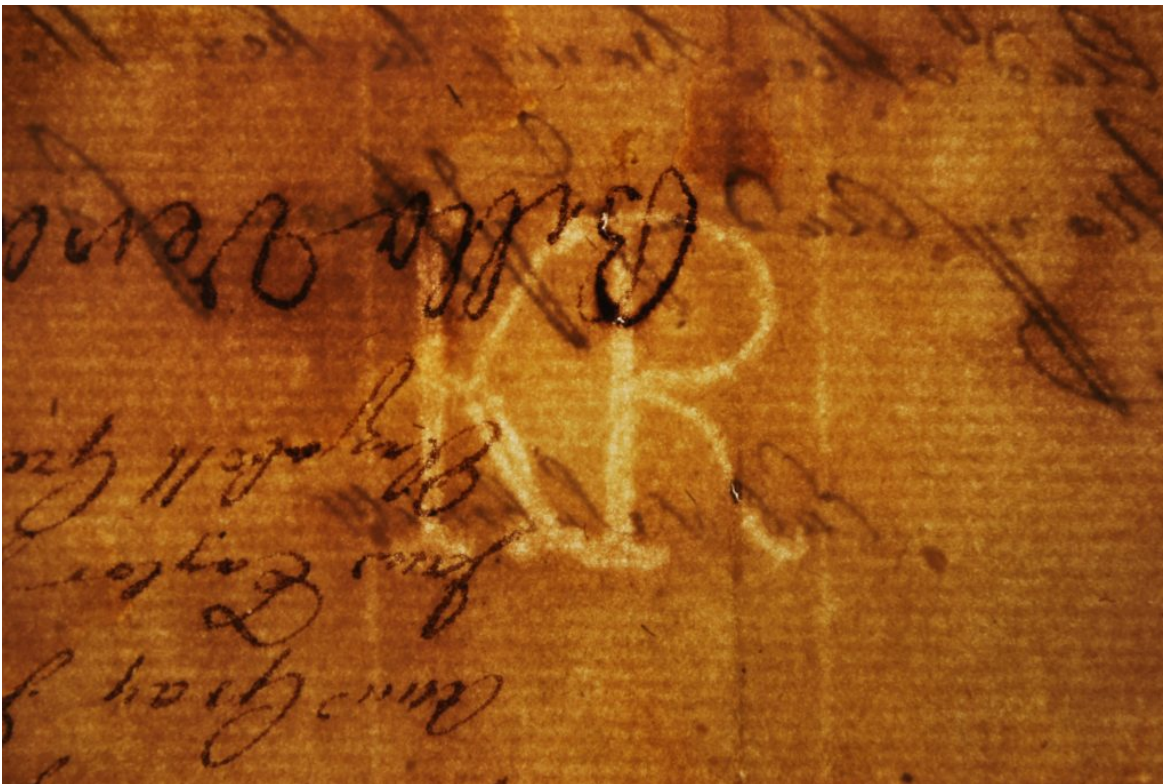
Eventually, I began to find my answers. My first lead came from the Internet (of course), where I discovered that the lions and X patterns were the Coat of Arms of Amsterdam. I researched other leads from there (ensuring that it was not also the New Amsterdam crest, trying to locate domestic papermakers that used the crest, etc.) for a while more, as there were multiple copies of this watermark, but in various forms.



Clover of the  
Rittenhouse Mill, Early  
American Document  
Collection, Special  
Collections at  
Gettysburg College

Mary, my watermark mentor, continued her help from there. Many of the documents, tattered and brittle, had been sealed in an adhesive of which Mary did not approve. So, she decided to teach me a lesson in rehousing. While doing so, we opened a letter that was a few layers deep, and found a gorgeous clover watermark on one of the pages within. As it turns out, that watermark can be traced to the Rittenhouse family, the first papermakers in the United States, who started in Germantown, Pennsylvania around 1690. This particular piece of paper was used as an order from the Mayor of Philadelphia in the 1720's. Thus, we could tell that some of these papers could be quite valuable, not only for their content and age, but also for the paper itself.

I was excited to show Amy Lucadamo, our archivist, what Mary and I had discovered. So I showed her some of the watermarks, what I had found on the contents and background, yada yada ya...until she removed what I thought was the bottom of the box, only to expose about two dozen more documents.



Klaus Rittenhouse  
watermark, Early  
American Document  
Collection, Special  
Collections at  
Gettysburg College

Two dozen more documents means probably a dozen more watermarks. For someone full-swing into watermark joy, it was my Christmas in July. So, when I had time, I continued to identify watermarks, and research what I could on these hidden symbols. I knew that I wanted to publish the watermark information that I found, so I kept pounding away, attempting to source the paper and finding a little history behind the big history. Mary and I even ordered books, by Thomas Gravell and John Bidwell, to aid further research and to get more visual help.

In total, the Early American Document Collection (as it is now called) contains 32 watermarks, on a majority of the documents within. They will hopefully be digitized and available online, alongside the

documents themselves, by the end of my internship, or if not, in the coming fall. The choice was made that the watermark pictures should be included for the reasons I had briefly outlined above. Watermarks can be the hidden history beneath the historic manuscript content itself. The life of a paper can tell a story, from the inspiration behind the watermark design, to the location of the papermaker who produced it, to the far-away or nearby person who ended up using said paper. So much more can be contributed to the dialogue of a given piece with the addition of the watermark story, the hidden layer of history.

<http://blogging.musselmanlibrary.org/2016/07/>