

Database of Unsalariated Officers: An Overview of a Year's Work

By James E Rubino

Introduction:

Over the past year I have collaborated with Dr. Robert Bucholz, a professor in the History department on his Database of British Royal Court Officers (1660-1837) first as an intern, then as a research assistant. At the beginning of this academic year however, I started a project to build a sub-database of unsalaried court officers to be part of Dr. Bucholz's larger database. Currently the database is still in the draft stage, but the ultimate goal in constructing this database of quasi-contractors is to attempt to answer the question of whether these positions were granted in recognition of merit or as a result of connections/favoritism. In this presentation I will provide historical background on the topic of unsalaried officers of the British Royal Court, a progress report on where I currently am in my project, and examples brought from my research.

Background:

To begin, I'm going to give a bit of background on the historical terminology and significance of court officers and Royal Warrants. First off, what is a court officer, and what exactly does unsalaried mean in this instance? A court officer is, essentially, an employee of sorts of the British Crown. Nearly everyone involved with the operations of the crown is a court officer, from the porters to the chamberlain. However, "unsalaried" does not indicate an unpaid position, only a position without *regular* pay, similar to a contractor. They were paid, but generally on a commission, piecework, or per job basis. They were paid for their services/work as needed and the crown would not be their only employer. Most often these unsalaried officers would be the heads of organizations and companies, being already something of successes before being appointed. Examples of unsalaried officers include artists, vendors, craftsmen, actors and so on. Interestingly, musicians are not part of this group. These unsalaried officers were appointed via a King's Warrant, also known as a Royal Warrant, and the idea was that these would go to the very best practitioners in the field as befitting those who provide services to the crown. As such, Royal Warrants are incredibly sought after even today for their prestige when rare openings appear, especially since they are held for life (or until the holder surrenders the position). These warrants are also awarded to companies as well, so the concept of a shoe company being the sole supplier of a football team is relatively applicable here.

A final bit of background, the reason why this database starts at this time is that the archives had burned down, so for these records 1660 is essentially the start point.

Objectives:

With this background information out of the way, now I can describe what exactly my work with Dr. Bucholz is, which at the moment has two objectives. The first objective (and priority at the moment) of the project is to create a separate sub-database alongside Dr. Bucholz's larger Database of British Royal Court Officers (1660-1837). Whereas Dr. Bucholz's database was comprehensive, housing all of the officers, my database is to house all of the unsalaried court officers.

The idea of these warrants being awarded to the best and brightest that I mentioned earlier seems obvious, but as always, these claims should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism. Too

often it would seem that those deemed the most deserving of prestige appear to be close friends of those in power. This in mind, Dr. Bucholz and I thought that it would be interesting to put this claim to the test and he entrusted me to pursue this inquiry.

Progress Report:

This project at the moment is well underway and is to be done in two parts. The first part is archival in nature and comprises the majority of my current work. I am in the process of going through scanned primary source documents (in the form of employment records) for pertinent names and positions and then record whatever information I could gather from the documents. In later stages I will most likely learn to use a microfilm machine as some documents have yet to be scanned. I have yet to do much in the second part of my project, the research portion, in which I take these names and using the Dictionary of National Biography I then attempt to find their background so I can come closer to hopefully answering Dr. Bucholz's and my thesis.

Part One: Documents and the Process of Building the Database

On this slide I have the two images that form the two parts of this portion of my work, with the first being a scanned copy of a page from an employment record, and the second being an example of what an entry would look like in the database. Each entry will have every person who held that position organized alphabetically and by chronological hire date, with the hire date, departure date, and reason for departure listed.

It is important to note that even though I am using historical records as a way to track history, they are anything but consistent, and possess a history entirely of their own. Names, words, positions, etc. are frequently spelled differently and with differing styles, depending on whomever is writing the records. Sometimes only a last name is given without even a date of entry, and these at the moment I have to accept as lost to time. Rarely will a departure date be listed, but a reason is strangely often given, usually being death. Infrequently is the writing and spelling concise to our modern spelling, but often it is near enough where it's relatively obvious what the word is. I also was able to witness some of the progression of the English language with my own eyes, seeing Taylor be both a profession and surname at once. Fortunately, there is a general trend throughout the documents, with the writing and spelling becoming more and more coherent while the format grows increasingly consistent as the years progress. Whereas in the documents from 1660 I would very often have to mark sections unreadable or outright guess at their meaning, from 1714 onward the largest obstacles seem to essentially be that of handwriting style and some structural choices in how the records are formatted, which is very much a welcome development.

Part Two: Research

As mentioned earlier, the second part of my project is to research these names on a page and to find out who exactly they are, and if I can, how they earned their positions. I am going to present three of them that especially struck me as memorable for their stories. The first two stand out as examples of selection based on likely merit, but the third is a reminder that these Royal Warrants were not a guarantee of lasting success by any means.

Sir Robert Vyner [Viner], Goldsmith:

Viner was one of the King's goldsmiths and was responsible for supplying the Royal Jewel House. He performed in this post for twenty-four years. On top of this, he eventually came to own his family's banking house (formerly owned by his uncle with whom he apprenticed under), and eventually became the Crown's largest single creditor. He was knighted in 1665 and was granted a baronet in 1666. In addition, he was the Lord Mayor of London during the period 1674-75. A financier of the Restoration era, it is difficult to ascertain his full historical impact, but he was for certain a forerunner of those who made the establishment of the Bank of England possible. The capital raised by him and his colleagues comprised a large part of the capital used to establish the Bank of England, so he is something of a proto-ancestor to that establishment.

Thomas Newcombe Sr, Printer:

Thomas stands out for an eventful and tumultuous early career, having printed Descartes' first English-translated work (*A Discourse of a Method*) in 1649. However, that same year in September he was arrested for printing John Lilburne's controversial *Apprentices of London* and *Outcry of the Young Men* and was released only after promising not to print any more seditious or unlicensed works. Throughout his career from this point he was notable for printing a plethora of periodicals, including *The London Gazette* and other literary works (including those of John Dryden, one of the United Kingdom's most famous poets and very first Poet Laureate). He eventually came to run one of the largest print houses in London. Ironically, this turn of fortune and dominance would come after the fire of 1666, which destroyed the original print house and led to its relocation to Savoy. In December 1675 he was elected to the Stationers Company (Known today as The Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers) governing body, and two years later he and his colleague Henry Hills were recognized as the king's printers. He would serve in this position from 1679 until his death on December 26, 1681 at 55, with his funeral being attended by (among others) more than 200 members of the Stationers' Company. Newcombe is unabashedly my favorite, for his rollercoaster of an early career that started seemingly from the peak before plunging into the valley before eventually rising to an even higher peak by the time of his death.

Nicholas Dixon, Limner:

A surprisingly obscure figure, especially given his position as the King's limner (A painter specializing in miniatures such as locket portraits), his birth and death dates are unknown, which also extends to his parentage. In his position as the King's limner (something of an upset with potentially extraneous influence), Dixon was known for his mastery of the technical part of limning, with his most notable works being that of young women with almond eyes. During this time, he was also the keeper of the King's picture closet, allegedly having shrewd negotiating ability. He was succeeded by Peter Cross in 1678 after his style had changed considerably to be more experimental and innovative, though in the eyes of his contemporaries he had deteriorated. He also continued his interest in art collecting after his departure from the court, leading to him setting up a miniatures lottery in 1698. Unfortunately, this would be an utter failure and his final recorded appearance in 1708 would paint a similarly depressing picture, with his portrait of Lady Henrietta Cavendish being described "done by Dixon whose feeble work shows him aged then".

On that rather somber note I will conclude my presentation by describing how I have developed and gained in experience during my year of working with Dr. Bucholz on this undertaking.

Part Three: Conclusion

What was Gained

Obviously, what with all this work on historical documents in the process I've gained far greater competency with handling and interpreting historical documents, though I have yet to physically touch one. I have also benefited personally from this, for before beginning this project I have historically had great difficulty reading cursive (to the chagrin of some). I am pleased however to say that this is no longer the case. I have also gained valuable experience and exposure to the various databases and tools of research and preservation that professionals use in their original research in addition to learning how to create a database/record.

However, the most valuable area that I have developed from my work thus far with Dr. Bucholz is with no skill or experience, but philosophically. Dr. Bucholz stated this idea to me as we began, that history is about saving lives after the fact, to preserve the lives, works, achievements, and stories of those that came before us. All too often we chose to only recall the names of great men and women, yet without the multitudes of unrecognized people behind them, they would never have achieved what they did. And yet these "inconsequential" people achieved truly consequential things, so can they really be deemed as unimportant? Simply from the group of people I mentioned in this lecture alone stand two strong examples: a goldsmith essentially bankrolling the Bank of England over the course of his life, and a printer, once imprisoned for printing controversial and radical texts, finding himself eventually one of the King's two printers and on the Stationers' Company governing board. Surely, they too deserve to be remembered for both their stories and contributions.

A Closing Anecdote:

In around October, I encountered John Dryden's entry as 'Poet Laurette' under a small, undecorated, and inconsequential bottom of a page opposite a group of The King's Actors. There was nothing to indicate that he was in any way important other than the nagging feeling that I had heard his name before. His was the only entry on the page, almost as an afterthought. Perhaps the line between being important enough to be remembered and to be forgotten is thinner than we think.

Acknowledgements:

In conclusion, I would like to thank Dr. Bucholz for making all of this possible and continuing to be my mentor and enabler to my academic curiosity, my friends and peers for their continual encouragement, and my family for their ever-enduring support.

Resources:

I've included a link to Dr. Bucholz's Database of British Royal Court Officers (1660-1837) and a link to the appendix where my early work with him is shown.

Main Page: <http://courtofficers.ctsdh.luc.edu>

Appendix: <http://courtofficers.ctsdh.luc.edu/APPENDIX.pdf>

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