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Donna E. Kelly

State Archives of North Carolina, donna.kelly@ncdcr.gov

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Notes

A section dedicated to providing useful information to promote scholarship in the field.

Experiences at the James Iredell Papers¹

Donna Kelly

I would like to give you a little background on how I came to be in documentary editing. I've loved history ever since fifth grade. Then in the summer after eighth grade my father and I took a genealogy class. I decided to research my great-great-grandfather, who served as a captain in the Civil War. For the research I went to the State Archives. Once there, I was enamored with it all. On my sixteenth birthday all I wanted to do was to spend the day researching at the Archives in Raleigh. I declared that "I'm gonna work there some day." Sure enough, after getting my undergraduate degree at Wake Forest University and working at the Archives during the summer and on Saturdays, I was lucky enough to become a full time archivist in 1984. Shortly thereafter, I became a certified archivist. I then decided to obtain an MA in Public History at North Carolina State University. As part of that program I took a documentary editing class, taught by Jeff Crow. I decided then and there that that was *really* what I wanted to do. It was the perfect blend of research, writing, and working with original records. I graduated from the program in 1988 and tried three times to get a job with the Historical Publications Section, to no avail. Finally, in 1996, I was hired as the editor of the Iredell Papers. In 1998 I became a certified public manager, which essentially served as a death knell to my hands-on editing. In 2001 I was promoted to administrator of the section where we publish North Carolina history, just like university presses. I am in a unique situation in that I have the luxury of editing, being paid by the state to do what I love, and I also decide what Archives and History will publish, with help of course. I am extremely fortunate to be a history major and actually working in my chosen field.

Now on to my experience working with the Iredell Papers. It took me eight years to see it through press, and even then it required the help of a co-editor. It was published in 2003. I'll begin with a brief history of the project,

¹Donna Kelly presented this talk at the 2005 Annual ADE Meeting in Denver.

some of the sources I used in my research, and some of the fun and foibles of my research. I'll also point out some of the more intriguing tidbits.

On 23 January 1962 Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, executive director of the then National Historical Publications Commission, wrote a letter to Dr. Christopher Crittenden, director of the North Carolina State Department of Archives and History. In it he reported Felix Frankfurter's interest in seeing the papers of Justice James Iredell Sr. edited and published. Justice Frankfurter, of the U.S. Supreme Court, considered Iredell, who was the first North Carolinian to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, one of the most brilliant minds of his time, and, in fact, of the nation's entire history.

During the next few months a number of scholars were approached about the advisability of a new edition of the Iredell Papers. The consensus was that such a project had great merit; the 1857 edition of the life and correspondence of James Iredell, edited by Griffith J. McRee, was incomplete and contained inaccuracies, and a multivolume series should be undertaken if and when funding could be obtained.

Iredell himself did an outstanding job of preserving his own papers. He would fold all of his letters to one-sixth the size of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet and then write on the outer "shuck" who the correspondent was and the date, so they were very well organized, making it much easier for later research. His family members preserved his papers and McRee had access to them while writing his two-volume work. He had hoped that the entire collection would be placed in the archives of the North Carolina Historical Society in Chapel Hill, but that did not happen. Once he returned the letters to Iredell's descendants in Raleigh, they held them until 1909, when R. D. W. Connor, secretary of the newly created North Carolina Historical Commission, persuaded the Charles E. Johnson family to turn over the largest part of the collection to the commission, which later became the State Archives. Fifty years later Duke University acquired the remainder of the collection, which is about a third the size of the Iredell holdings in Raleigh.

Plans for publishing the papers of James Iredell called for three volumes consisting of letters, political essays, and an assortment of other materials. The name of Dr. Don Higginbotham, then on the faculty of the Department of History at Louisiana State University and later at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was proposed as editor. Arrangements were made with Dr. Higginbotham to edit the papers, with publication by what was then known as the Division of Archives and History. Volumes I (1767-1777) and II (1778-1783) subsequently were published in 1976. They contain virtually

every known letter written by Iredell or written to him through the year 1783. Unfortunately they are now out of print.

Twenty years elapsed before funding was available to continue the series. As I stated earlier, in 1996 a position for the editor of the Iredell Papers was advertised. I was fortunate enough to work on the project until 2001 when I was promoted to administrator of the section. I then turned the project over to the capable hands of Lang Baradell.

When I started editing I was enthusiastic and certain that I could transcribe all of the documents and publish them all in one volume, as the original plans called for. But once I got into the papers, I felt that there was simply too much information to put into one volume. I decided that the best approach would be to divide the work into two volumes, with a natural break occurring at 1789. I did complete the transcriptions for 1790–1799, so I hope I have made Lang's job a little easier. My name will also appear on the fourth volume, which will cover Iredell's Supreme Court years, even though Lang will have done most of the work.

Once I got used to reading Iredell's handwriting, which was a feat in and of itself, I began to feel like a member of his family. Reading his poignant words about his first child's death and his expressions of love for his wife Hannah in letter after letter gave me insight into a man who had true compassion and integrity. As an example of what a giving man he was, even though it was not convenient for him to do so, he continued to aid his distant cousin, Henry McCulloh, with his legal affairs, even going so far as to house his cousin's illegitimate son! I'll go into even more scandals later on. In addition, his letters revealed his shortcomings, such as misplacing files and being taken advantage of financially.

As I mentioned earlier, it was necessary to research Iredell's papers in three repositories—the North Carolina State Archives, Duke University, and UNC-Chapel Hill. In my opinion, both as a trained archivist and as an editor, it would have made much more sense to keep all of the papers together and it would have certainly made my job a lot easier. One example of the problems inherent in having the collection split is one undated letter located at Duke, printed in McRee, written by Iredell to, I believe, William R. Davie. In the box of miscellaneous papers at the State Archives, I found the outer "shuck" giving the date. The folds on the paper matched the folds on the Xerox copy that I had made at Duke, so I was able to date the letter.

In other instances I was able to date letters that were filed as undated, which always gave me a thrill. One in particular was a letter from William

Hooper simply dated May 1. I was able, by the context, to date it to 1784. Another letter from Penelope Dawson to Hannah Iredell was dated 17 October. Because it mentioned her pregnancy and the death of a Mrs. Pearson, the letter could be dated to 1784. Another letter from Iredell's brother, Arthur, was written 28 February. Again, it was filed in the undated correspondence, but by the context I was able to date it to 1785. A letter from William Hooper was printed in McRee. McRee dates it 1784 but it was filed with the 1786 letters at the State Archives. References to the birth of Iredell's second child, Annie, and to the wedding of Penny Dawson indicate that 1786 is the correct year. A letter from William R. Davie was undated but from the contents it was determined to be from November 1788.

I also used a perpetual calendar to help me identify dates when only the day of the week was given. A letter to Hannah was written from Edenhouse, Thursday morning. The endorsement cited January 1787. From the context it was apparent that Iredell was writing while traveling to Warrenton, so I deduced that it was written 25 January 1787.

Because of my training as an archivist, I knew that the county records contained a wealth of information. Therefore I searched them often for answers to many of my questions. For example, one particular letter involved a mercantile suit in Chowan County. I was able to find out a lot of information by going to the court minutes; the trial, appearance, and reference docket; and the civil action papers. Other records that I used included governors' papers, loyalist claims, district superior court records, and General Assembly session records.

Several letters dealt with specific legal issues. One involving slaves was found in the Orange County estate records. Apparently slaves were to be used to pay a debt, but according to the records, they had not been, so the injured party took the debtor to court and eventually received payment. Another example involved identifying a Mr. Bevan, a carpenter, mentioned in a 1784 letter to Iredell from William Hooper. There was no Bevan in the 1790 census. However, by searching the Chowan County records, I located an estate for George Beving, who died ca. 1790, before the census was taken.

Other little-known information came from records of the Works Progress Administration. In North Carolina, workers compiled an exhaustive listing of all the cemeteries in the state. It is located in a huge card catalog in the Search Room. I found birth and death dates for numerous individuals that I had a hard time identifying any other way.

Some "serious" academic historians often reject the work of genealogists.

In my twelve years of working in the State Archives I came to respect their work. Many records have been abstracted and privately published by what I would argue to be “serious” genealogists. These individuals painstakingly abstracted records that have proven to be extremely useful to my research on the Iredell Papers. Several examples include an abstract of an Edenton merchant ledger, the sales of confiscated loyalist property, wills, marriage records, numerous newspapers, and tax lists.

I absolutely hated to have to put “enclosures not found” or “_____ letter not found.” It happened more often than I would have liked and it was like admitting defeat. For instance, one nagging puzzle concerns cemetery data. I could not verify the burial place of Margaret Pearson, mother of Nathaniel Dukinfield, one of Iredell’s close friends. Since one of my duties, when I worked at the Archives, was to oversee the collection of cemetery data for the whole state, it was doubly frustrating.

Other things I could not find include the source of some of the quotations used by Iredell in a piece written for a newspaper in August 1787. One is “if e’er to wit a coxcomb makes pretence---mark the sure barrier between that and sense.” The other is “let his only answer be his life.” If anyone can tell me where either of these quotes came from, it would be great. Luckily Lang was able to find answers to most of my literary questions.

There were references that stumped me altogether and I still don’t have the answers to them. Thomas Iredell wrote in November about a theft by a member of the General Assembly. No name was given. In an 11 November 1791 letter from James Iredell to his wife Hannah, a reference is made to an accident involving a fire, whereby Richard Dobbs Spaight was apparently injured. Where did it occur and how did it start? Newspapers would be a logical choice for more information about it but nothing could be found. In December of 1784 there was a wedding between a Mr. Howe and a Miss Granberry, but more details are needed since the marriage bonds did not reveal this information. Also, it is evident in the correspondence that Iredell’s niece Nelly (Helen) Blair married Samuel Tredwell sometime between 15 March 1789 and 22 June 1790, but there is no surviving marriage bond in the official records to give an exact date.

Now on to some of the more interesting, humorous, poignant, and surprising things I ran across in my research. On 11 January 1784 Nathaniel Dukinfield, a friend of Iredell’s, writes from England, describing his wife, “she is not at all handsome, but what you may call a devilish good one.” You can use your imagination to interpret what he means! In one letter from

William (Billy) Blair, Iredell's nephew, he was shocked and appalled at the social customs in Yorktown, Virginia:

There are few or no people of any character in it & no genteel company. They all mix without any distinction of highest or lowest . . . it is not only at public entertainment that they mix but visit each other without any regard to character or family & the people are so very pushing that if you wish to entertain a select company it is out of your power

Other subjects were touched on as well. Most letters inquire about the health of all the family and friends and discuss the weather. Our own modern polite conversation is reminiscent of this practice.

Modes of travel at that time included canoes, stages, horses, carriages (referred to as "chairs"), vessels, ferries, boats, and brigs. If the weather was bad people could not travel; rain, wind, heat, and floods made the roads impassable. July began what was referred to as the "sickly season," and weather contributed to sicknesses like ague and fever, small pox, rheumatism, gout, toothaches, headaches, whooping cough, fits, inflammation of the bowels, colic, sore throats, flux, colds, delirium, inflamed eyes, and blisters. Remedies for these "complaints" included cinnabar fumigation for a sore throat, an emetic for ague and fever, "castor oyle" for inflammation of the bowels, and snake root for colds. Other more generic treatments included salts, bitters, tea and bark, and bleeding people, hopefully as a last resort!

Regarding family news, which was far and away the most common topic in his writing, in June of 1795 Iredell happily informed his cousin, H. E. McCulloh, that his wife Hannah was pregnant. However, in October he wrote of his son's death after only two days. He had been born 1 October and died 3 October. "The enjoyments of life are so fleeting & transitory, so continually dashed with disappointment and distress!" Several births, deaths, and marriages were reported, including his own daughter's birth (Annie) on 22 December 1785.

Politics, like today, was often a topic discussed and debated in correspondence. In a 1 May 1784 letter from Samuel Johnston, Iredell's brother-in-law and later governor of North Carolina, he discussed support for Tarborough as the capital and changing the time of holding elections and the General Assembly. Other letters discussed the political climate in England, as well as listing local election returns. Iredell's letters also recorded his philosophical thoughts on politics. In a letter to A. Nielson in which he wrote "no man is neither good or bad, merely for his opinions & that in political questions there is room for almost an infinite diversity of sentiment," Iredell

was defending his actions in supporting America during the Revolution.

Entertainment included playing cards, dancing at balls, going to reappings, visiting, and attending horse races. Jean Blair, Iredell's sister-in-law, said of reappings "they are frolicks that I am not fond of but I go to please Mrs. Johnston" (Samuel's wife).

Speaking of Jean Blair, she gave lots of motherly advice in her letters to her daughter Nelly. Jean Blair reminds me of my own mother in some ways. She admonished her daughter for making poor choices and for her idleness: "you cannot always be young either can you afford to spend your whole time in idleness . . ." "you would not have written to me had you not wanted something." In another light, which illustrates the sacrificial nature of a mother's love for her children, she said:

I sincerely wish you happy and had at any time much rather be unhappy myself than see you so, & so far am i from wishing to deprive you of any rational or agreeable amusement that i would work at any time while i ought to sleep to procure them for you . . .

Also found in the correspondence were lists on prices of certain goods & commodities. These included sugar, salt peter, coffee, tea, tallow, books, pens, paper, feathers, blankets, andirons, flat irons, cows, hogs, tobacco, snuff, port, needles, thread, material, caps, balloon hats, razors and cucumber seeds. Price comparisons were often made, so people were even bargain shoppers back in the 1700s. Food items mentioned in these letters included meal, beans, strawberries, oranges for marmalade, fish, lamb, turkey, chicken, milk, butter, and bacon.

Another subject covered in the letters is fashion. Jean Blair, writing to Nelly, told of a new fashion that appeared in church: "a Tiffany hat with broad lace quilled very thick around it. Hanging over the hat was Tiffany & lace & flowers & a little whalebone to keep it in shape." Other fashion items mentioned included combs, umbrellas, aprons, worsted and thread stockings, coats, cloaks, waistcoats, shifts, shoes, cuffs, pocket handkerchiefs, ruffle shirts, petticoats, and gowns. Many of these were made out of linen or flannel, from which the material had been dyed by hand.

Interesting expressions that I ran across included a reference to a "brute" and a "block head." When describing her loneliness Jean Blair stated "I have not seen the face of a mortal." The terms "mortified" and "electrified" were commonly used. Other anecdotes include a reference to using smoke to signal for a boat, the disbaring of a lawyer, ladies going into officers' tents at

all hours of the night, and a description of a Dr. Lennox as “a fulsome old beast.”

There are a few scandals and soap operas involving Iredell’s correspondents. In either 1787 or 1789, Fred Ramcke was accused of fathering his sister-in-law’s child, although he denied it to Iredell. Nothing in the records has been found to prove or disprove the rumor. That has been one of the more frustrating examples of my research. Baron de Poellnitz had woman troubles of his own. His wife feigned a drowning and ran off with another man. Yet another man, Andrew Stoney, squandered money and then married the countess of Strathmore. She had several indiscreet relationships between her two marriages. They eventually divorced. When we were thinking of ways to market the book, we thought about using some of these scandals in our publicity. Something like “scintillating reading from the eighteenth century.”

Another interesting exchange of letters occurred in 1787 concerning Iredell’s candidacy for the House of Commons. Those trying to defeat Stephen Cabarrus put Iredell’s name forth without Iredell’s knowledge. Supposedly a tavern was kept open for anyone willing to vote for Iredell. Cabarrus wrote Iredell very politely telling him that he never would have run for office if he had known Iredell was interested in seeking office, but that was only because of the way it was carried out, he did not believe it to be true. Cabarrus ended up defeating Iredell in the election.

I thoroughly enjoyed working on the papers of James Iredell and now that I push paper, I really miss it. I do keep my hand in it though. As I mentioned earlier, I’m in charge of deciding (with input from my staff and a very capable advisory editorial committee) what we publish. Therefore, if you know of someone working on a project that might be appropriate for us to publish, either as a documentary edition or as an article in the *North Carolina Historical Review*, please let me know.