Abstract: Charles Herbert’s journal chronicles his time as a prisoner of the English during the Revolutionary War. It describes his daily activities and the hardships of prison. Many sections of the diary have been written in code. A cipher is provided.
Descriptive Summary

**Identification:** MSS 097, Item 037

**Creator:** Herbert, Charles, 1757-1808.

**Title:** Charles Herbert Revolutionary War journal

**Inclusive Dates:** 1776-1780

**Extent:** 1 v. (208 p.) ; 17 cm.

**Language:** Materials entirely in English.

Administrative Information

**Citation:** MSS 097, Item 037, Charles Herbert Revolutionary War journal, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.

**Location:** Special Collections, University of Delaware Library Newark, Delaware 19717-5267 Phone: 302-831-2229 Fax: 302-831-6003 URL: http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/

**Source:** Purchase, 1949.

**Processing:** Processed and encoded by Kate Hand, November 2007. Updated by E. Evan Echols, April 2014


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Biographical Note

Charles Herbert was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, on November 17, 1757, to John and Jane Herbert. Charles’ mother died when he was two months old and he was committed to the care of his aunt, Lydia Pierce. He married Holly Butler on November 8, 1783. He worked as a block-maker until his death on September 4, 1808.

On November 19, 1776, Herbert boarded the brigantine Dolton, which was soon after captured by the British man-of-war Reasonable. He was transported to England where, after spending several weeks in a hospital with smallpox, he was accused of high treason. He spent the next two years in Old Mill Prison in Plymouth, where he kept his daily journal hidden from the guards. He was released March 1779, in an exchange of prisoners organized by Benjamin Franklin. He then served on the frigate Alliance under Commodore J. Paul Jones. Herbert finally returned to the United States on August 23, 1780.

Sources:


Additional biographical information derived from the collection.
Scope and Content Note

Charles Herbert’s journal chronicles his time as a prisoner of the English during the Revolutionary War. It describes his daily activities and the hardships of prison. Many sections of the diary have been written in code. A cipher is provided.

The first entry chronologically, dated November 15, 1776, occurs a number of pages into the book. Herbert described the capture the ship he was on, the brigantine Dolton, by the British man-of-war Reasonable, followed by his time in captivity aboard the English warship. After arriving in England, he was transported to the Royal Hospitals for a rash. He was then diagnosed with smallpox. He described his symptoms and treatment in the journal.

On May 4, 1777, after recovering from his illness, Herbert was accused of high treason and sent to Old Mill Prison in Plymouth, England. During his two years at the prison, Herbert described the living conditions, various escape attempts, and what news he received of both the war and the political climate of England. The prisoners suffered greatly, at times, from both hunger and lack of food. At other times, however, due to either charity or new regulations passed by British officials, their rations were increased and they were fairly well cared for. Herbert made wooden boxes with whatever materials he was able to acquire. By selling these, he was able to buy additional rations, supplies, and even books. He often remarked that he enjoyed better conditions than the average prisoner.

It appears that the prisoners were kept, not in separated cells, but in large yards where they had free contact with each other. Herbert recorded innumerable escape attempts, nearly all of which were unsuccessful. Despite repeated attempts to dig under the walls, the prisoners were either discovered before they could leave the prison or quickly brought back into captivity. Escape attempts and other transgressions were punished by putting the offender on half rations or confining him for a time to the "Black-hole." Herbert only attempted to escape once. On December 29, 1779, the prisoners succeeded in digging a tunnel out and a large percentage of them escaped. Herbert and most others were eventually captured, returned to the prison, and put on half rations. Herbert also described punishments meted out by the prisoners themselves. When one prisoner stole another's bread and cheese, the transgressor was forced by his fellow captives to "run the Gantlet up one side of the prison and down the other which is upwards of 130 foot through a double file of men with each man A Nettle."

On January 23, 1779, Herbert learned that he was to be one of the first hundred prisoners exchanged for English prisoners in France. He did not leave Old Mill Prison until March 15. This section of the journal ends at the back of the volume with the entry for March 19.

The front of the volume contains tables listing the passengers aboard the Dolton and the prisoners in the Old Mill Prison with their places of origin. Herbert also recorded the names of the ships that had been captured. The tables list the number of prisoners who died, escaped, and joined the British army in order to be released. The age of the journal makes these tables difficult to read, but they have been transcribed in the published editions.

Following the tables, there are two more sections of entries before the main journal begins. The first section contains entries from February 15 to August 23, 1780. The second contains entries from April 12 to
August 14, 1779. They describe Herbert’s time in France after being released from prison, his service aboard the frigate *Alliance*, commanded by Commodore J. Paul Jones, and his eventual trip home. On May 21, 1870, Herbert visited Benjamin Franklin in Paris.

An edited transcription of this journal (with the coded entries deciphered) was first published in 1847 by Charles H. Peirce of Boston. That edition contains letters and journal entries from Benjamin Franklin, Commodore Jones, and others. These sources shed light on Herbert’s military service after his release, which is only partially explained in his short and infrequent journal entries during the period. Other editions of the journal were published in 1854, 1968, and 2007.
Selected Search Terms

Personal Names

Herbert, Charles, 1757-1808--Diaries.
Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790.
Jones, John Paul, 1747-1792.

Corporate Names

Old Mill Prison.
Dolton (Brigantine)
Alliance (Frigate)

Topical Terms

Prisoners of war--England--History--18th century--Diaries.
Cryptography--History--18th century.

Geographic Names

United States--History--Revolution, 1775-1783--Naval operations.
United States--History--Revolution, 1775-1783--Prisoners and prisons.
Plymouth (England)

Form/Genre Terms

Diaries.

Occupation

Prisoners of war.
Soldiers.

Related Materials in this Repository

This item forms part of MSS 097 Diaries, Journals, and Ships' Logs collection.
Publication Note

Detailed Description of the Collection

Charles Herbert Revolutionary War journal, 1776-1780 [Item 037]

1 v.