Abstract: The Alfred I. Paxson family history, diary, and reflections consists of approximately 116 pages of handwritten commentary and reflection relating to the life of Delaware Quaker and farmer Alfred I. Paxson. The first eighty-seven pages of the volume consist of Paxson's autobiography and, later, diary entries. The final twenty-nine pages of the volume, spanning from pages 100 through 129 of the numbered journal, contain several of Paxson's "Reflections and Meditations" on topics such as death, religion, nature, the uncertainty of life, the usefulness of industry, bad and good, war, the seasons, the "wonderfulness of our maker," female tight-lacing, and the "going down" of the Friend Meeting in Stanton, Delaware.
**Descriptive Summary**

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<th>Identification:</th>
<th>MSS 097, Item 168</th>
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<tr>
<td>Creator:</td>
<td>Paxson, Alfred I.</td>
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<td>Title:</td>
<td>Alfred I. Paxson family history, diary, and reflections</td>
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<td>1888-1894</td>
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<td>1 v. (193 p.) ; 25 cm.</td>
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Biographical Note

Alfred I. Paxson was born on June 15, 1826, to Quakers Joseph W. and Phebe (Kirk) Paxson of Stanton, Delaware. Alfred Paxson, the middle of three children, had an older sister, Ann Eliza Paxson (April 18, 1825-August 15, 1842), and a younger sister, Sarah W. Paxson (February 7, 1828-February 2, 1885). He married Mary P. Phipps on May 23, 1889.

Alfred Paxson's father, Joseph W. Paxson, initially moved to Delaware from his home in Lower Makefield Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1819. His purpose for moving was to begin work at a mill owned by Jesse Trump in what is now Marshallton, Delaware. After a year at the mill of Jesse Trump, Joseph Paxson was forced to turn to farming as an occupation after all of his efforts to purchase his own mill in the region fell through. Joseph, and later his wife, Phebe, and children, resided on a 100-acre farm north of present-day Marshallton, Delaware, until 1839. After selling his Delaware farm Paxson made his second attempt to purchase his own saw mill, this time in West Grove, Chester County, Pennsylvania. This purchase also fell through, and Paxson finally settled to farming in Delaware permanently in the spring of 1839. He raised his children on a farm, named Willow Grove Farm, on the Upper New Arke Road about half a mile north of the mill at which he worked when he initially moved to Delaware in 1819.

Alfred Paxson's adolescence and adulthood was spent farming on his father's farm near Marshallton. Upon the death of his father on September 7, 1868, Alfred inherited the family farm, where he resided with his mother and sister. After the death of his sister Sarah in 1885 and mother Phebe in 1886, Paxson married Mary P. Phipps in 1889. The couple lived on the family farm near Marshallton until Alfred's death on August 27, 1894.

The Paxson family was plagued by illnesses and Alfred Paxson outlived not only his parents, but also both of his sisters. His eldest sister, Ann Eliza, suffered from "fits" from her birth and throughout her life was "like a little child." She passed away at the age of 17. Paxson's younger sister, Sarah, suffered with rheumatism throughout her life and was almost entirely unable to move her joints or walk for five years prior to her death at age 57 in 1885. Additionally, Alfred himself was troubled by several ailments, including swelling of his right knee and bladder problems, which eventually led to several hospitalizations and bladder surgery in Wilmington, in 1892.

Beginning in the year 1886, Paxson began to write the history of his family, including extensive discussions of his and the family's illnesses, personal beliefs, and work at Willow Grove Farm. The autobiography and diary that resulted from his efforts aimed to preserve the memory of his family and their suffering from various ailments. As he wrote, "I thought if there was any one left that cared anything about the family they would like to have some account of their lives sickness and Death [sic]."

Sources:

Information derived from the collection.
Scope and Content Note

The Alfred I. Paxson family history, diary, and reflections consists of approximately 116 pages of handwritten commentary and reflection relating to the life of Delaware Quaker and farmer Alfred I. Paxson. The first eighty-seven pages of the volume consist of Paxson's autobiography and, later, diary entries. The final twenty-nine pages of the volume, spanning from pages 100 through 129 of the numbered journal, contain several of Paxson's "Reflections and Meditations" on topics such as death, religion, nature, the uncertainty of life, the usefulness of industry, bad and good, war, the seasons, the wonderfulness of our maker, female tight-lacing, and the "going down" of the Friend Meeting in Stanton, Delaware.

Though Paxson began writing about his family in 1886, according to the dates given for specific passages within the volume, the copy of his reflections housed in this collection dates to 1889. A note on the first page of the volume dated August 26, 1889, indicates that the volume was, "written by me Alfred I. Paxson and copied by my Wife [sic.]" (1). The volume bears a label from the Wilmington-based C. F. Thomas & Co. Booksellers, Stationers, Binders, and Blank Book Manufacturers. Altogether the volume contains 193 numbered pages, though, as noted above, only 116 of these pages bear writing.

The volume contains three different types of writing, namely: 1) Paxson's reflections on the lives of his family, including his own autobiography, 2) a diary-like account of Paxson's days, beginning in 1890, and 3) Paxson's brief "Reflections and Meditations" on various topics of interest to him as a nineteenth-century Delaware Quaker.

Paxson's biographical accounts of his family members and autobiography covers the first 71 pages of the volume. In this section, Paxson presents detailed information about his father, mother, and sisters, including their birth and death dates, places of birth, occupations, and the illnesses from which they suffered. He routinely praises his father's hard-working nature, and expresses sorrow over the suffering of his mother and sisters from various illnesses. Paxson's elder sister, Ann Eliza, suffered from "fits" as a child and never learned to speak. He explains how she was "[...] like a child she knew no danger or fear" (6). Additionally, he tells of incidents where she would pull pots of boiling water over herself, not knowing the danger, and, as a result, suffered severe burns. Ann Eliza died at the age of 17. Paxson's elder sister, Sarah, lived to the age of 57 but suffered from the age of 17 with severe rheumatism and "nerve's diseases." For the final five years of her life she was unable to control most of her joints, and, for the last two years, was completely unable to walk. Finally, Paxson's mother, Phebe, also experienced poor health in her final years. After losing her second daughter, Sarah, in 1885, Phebe "lost her mind." She passed away, possibly from a stroke, in 1886, after four months of severe mental distress. In addition to these reminiscences, this section of the volume also contains several financial registers, illustrating the bequests, debts, and other expenses accrued during the execution of Phebe Kirk Paxson and Sarah W. Paxson's wills. Mixed among Paxson's own autobiographical account are several passages on specific themes, including those entitled "On Narrow Escapes of Life," "On Mode of Living and Diet," and "On Diet." The first passage includes accounts of several of Paxson's near-death experiences while growing up and working on the family farm in Delaware. Some examples include his being thrown from a horse as a child of twelve, his nearly getting trampled by his horse and wagon while hauling lumber, and his falling on the teeth of his freshly sharpened harrow.
Following the passage "On Diet," the writing in the volume becomes more diary-like in nature. Pages 71 through 80 of the volume contain eleven dated diary entries written by Paxson. The majority of these entries detail his work on the farm and, most often, his declining health. On June 7, 1892, Paxson entered a hospital in Wilmington, Delaware, where he underwent bladder surgery. He details his seven-week stay in the hospital beginning on page 81, including discussions about the quality of his nurses, the slow and painful healing of his incision site, the view of the Brandywine River from his hospital room, and his difficulties with a rowdy group of men in the next hospital room over. On the final page of this diary section, page 87, the lone example of work written solely by Paxson's wife, Mary, appears. The tone abruptly changes from first person to third person as she explains in a brief paragraph that Paxson "went to the hospital a second time." She explains he stayed for ten weeks beginning in September of 1893, underwent a second surgery to remove stones from his bladder, and returned home for a long and painful winter. She ends the passage as follows: "He took to his bed after riding out to field, to superintend some work he was having done, and died in about one week, 8th Mo. 27th 1894. Passed away quietly about 7 P.M." (87).

The final section spans twenty-nine pages from page 100 through 129, and contains fourteen separate "Reflections and Meditations" written by Paxson between 1887 and 1892. The titles of the passages include the following: "On Death," "On Religion As A Duty To Our God," "Reflections and Meditations of Alfred I. Paxson," "The Uncertainty of Life," "On The Usefullness [sic.] of Industry," "On Bad and Good," "On War," "On Spring," "On Summer," "On Autumn," "On Winter," "On The Wonderfulness of Our Maker," "On Female Tight Lacing," and "On the Going Down of Friends Meeting at Stanton." These passages reflect both Paxson's Quaker upbringing, as well as his life as a farmer. For example, in his passage on war Paxson reflects his belief that, "War as many other evils is a violation of the Christian principle it is the mane [sic.] spring of many dark and cruel evil [sic.] such as slavery and inhuman treatment of our fellow mortals[...]" (115). He notes that if he had been drafted during the Civil War, which he feared he might, he had made up his mind to go into the medical field as he could, "not consciously have born arms to engage in deadly conflict with fellow mortals[...]" (116). Two additional passages of note in this section include Paxson's remarks on the practice of female tight lacing, which he considered a, "violation of nature's laws" (125), and on the dissolution of the Stanton Friends Meeting house, where he had attended services most of his life. In the passage on the Stanton Meeting, dated March 19, 1892, Paxson expresses regret that not only his own meeting is closing, but also that the Friends Society appears to be changing and falling out of favor at the close of the nineteenth century. He notes that, "[...] a great many of Friends of this day you can scarcely tell them from other society by their dress" (129). He comments that he knows Presbyterians and Methodists who dress more plainly than many Friends. He places some blame for the dwindling membership on parents who have, "[...] not been careful enough to bring up their children in the old plain style of former Friends in dress and manners they have let them mingle with other society go to their meetings where they have been enticed by their music singing and the fashion of the world [...]" (128).

The Alfred I. Paxson family history, diary, and reflections includes a plethora of information for those interested in life in Delaware in the nineteenth century, most notably on topics including the following: Quakers in Delaware; farming; health, disease, surgery, hospitals, and mental illness; the history of the Marshallton/Stanton/Mill Creek Hundred region; family histories; and personal narratives.
Selected Search Terms

Personal Names

Paxson, Alfred I.--Diaries.

Paxson, Joseph W.

Paxson, Phebe Kirk.

Paxson, Ann Eliza.

Paxson, Sarah W.

Paxson, Mary P. Phipps.

Topical Terms

Quakers--Delaware--19th century--Diaries.

Mental health--19th century.

Health--19th century.

Agriculture--Delaware--19th century.

Geographic Names

Marshallton (Del.)--History--19th century--Sources.

Stanton (Del.)--History--19th century--Sources.

Wilmington (Del.)--History--19th century--Sources.

Form/Genre Terms

Autobiographies.

Diaries.

Occupation

Farmers.

Personal Contributors

Paxson, Mary P. Phipps.
Related Materials in this Repository

This item forms part of MSS 097 Diaries, Journals, and Ships' Logs collection.
Detailed Description of the Collection

Alfred I. Paxson family history, diary, and reflections, 1888-1894 [Item 168]