

# University of Miami Special Collections

## Finding Aid - Aaron Thomas papers (ASM0426)

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Aaron Thomas papers

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## Summary information

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<b>Repository:</b>	University of Miami Special Collections
<b>Title:</b>	Aaron Thomas papers
<b>ID:</b>	ASM0426
<b>Date:</b>	1798-1799 (date of creation)
<b>Physical description:</b>	0.25 linear ft.
<b>Language:</b>	English
<b>Language:</b>	Portuguese
<b>Dates of creation, revision and deletion:</b>	

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## Administrative history / Biographical sketch

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### Note

Aaron Thomas was born in Wigmore, Herefordshire, England, on January 18, 1762. According the Wigmore parish records, he was christened a day later. His parents, Aaron Thomas and Mary Pinches, had five other children: John Thomas (christened April 7, 1759), Mary Thomas (c. April 7, 1760), William Thomas (c. March 8, 1765), Moses Thomas (c. February 6, 1768) and Thomas Thomas (c. February 13, 1764) who died in infancy. According to Jean M. Murray in *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas*, John was a successful London silversmith. He married Mary Lane of Reading on June 17, 1786 and had five children: Robert, a Royal Navy Commander, Thomas Lane, John William, and Francis Lewis. The name of the fifth child is unknown. John W. and Francis succeeded their father in the silversmith business. Mary Thomas married a Mr. Brunton and had at least one son. Brother William Thomas was a merchant, married to Sarah Price, and had at least one son, the Reverend Aaron Thomas. Finally, Moses, the youngest brother of Aaron Thomas, was a London rate payer. Aaron's father was a tenant farmer in Wigmore, and appears to have been an influential member of the community, serving as a church warden on two separate occasions. In his journal, young Aaron fondly recalls his childhood at the Bury House in spite of his father's death, which occurred when Aaron was five or six years old. Aaron Thomas, Sr. most likely died in 1767 or 1768, as his name ceases to appear on the Church Loan Rates by 1768. Mary Thomas, the mother of Aaron Thomas, Jr., remarried on April 24, 1771 to William Beaman (Beavan) at St. Peter's Church, Hereford, Herefordshire.

There is no information regarding Aaron Thomas' formal education. From his journal entries one may assume some formal training, as he demonstrates a command of the English and Portuguese languages and expresses himself in a thoughtful manner. The only mention of education noted within the journal occurs as Thomas laments the fact that he received no formal training in navigation, as "had I understood Navigation, my name at this would a been in a more conspicuous situation." (p. 343)

There is little information on Thomas' life prior to his naval service. In 1793 he traveled to Chatham to enter the Royal Navy. Unlike many of his contemporaries who were pressed into service, Thomas joined voluntarily. His reasons for enlisting are uncertain; from frequent journal entries regarding the dismal but improving state of his finances, one might assume Thomas left home in search of the fortune that could be gained from prize money found cruising coastal waters. There is some indication that he was in debt to his brother John, and Thomas may have viewed the navy as an honorable and patriotic way of repaying this debt. His first ship was HMS Suffolk, a 74 gun warship. On March 21, 1794, Thomas left the Suffolk and subsequently joined the crew of HMS Boston, where he served until March 20, 1797. While aboard the Boston, he journeyed as part of a convoy to Newfoundland, as chronicled in his earlier journal. Upon leaving the Boston, Thomas joined the crew of HMS Concord, and traveled to the West Indies, arriving on September 7, 1797. He relished travel, and recalls in his journal travels to such distant places as Germany, Denmark, Italy, Istria, Dalmatia, Albania, Ragusa, Carnolia, Suabia, Romania, Spain, and Portugal, as well as to the Americas (p. 29).

According to the Quarter Bill of the Lapwing, which Thomas penned on page two hundred and seventy-seven of the journal, his position on the frigate was that of eleventh gunner, although his descriptions of life onboard demonstrate that he had an additional responsibility of selling slops (ready-made clothing and other goods) to shipmates.

Thomas was a lifelong bachelor, although he notes on page forty that "there cannot be a continual happy state in this life, unless a person is married," and mentions an opportunity for matrimony on St. Kitts. Thomas did, however, have a circle of family and acquaintances with whom he corresponded. Included in this group were his brother William, a merchant; his brother John, a successful London silversmith; his mother, Mrs. Beaman of Wigmore; and his friend W[alter]. W., who had served with Thomas on HMS Boston and of whom he wrote:

"in June 1796 I had resolved to part with my Servant when in the Boston, and had resolved to tell the Captain my reasons for parting with him was, "That he is composed of materials from the Mule, Hound and Fox. --From the Hound because he will Yawl cry if looked at. --From the Fox, because he has his slyness without his dishonesty. And from a Mule, because if spoken to, he will stand sullenly still, and appear like a crabb apple, floating in a Bucket of Vinegar, but I continued him in my service till April 1797, when I left the Ship, and so altered is my mind in a few months concerning this person W W. That he now stands in my will."

Whether or not Thomas was able to achieve happiness in the navy is debatable. His journal entries indicate that he was content with his chosen career, yet on page forty-one he wrote "I am really Malidito de Navio, Io often pensee de leaving it, et retiring to della questa Isola a Philadelphia or Quebec, untill a Guerra a finito. . ." Thomas did not relish the hot and humid weather of the West Indies, and wrote that the "West Indias is to hott and sickly for me," (p. 148) yet he continued to maintain the good health that he had enjoyed throughout his life. On page twenty-nine, he noted "I have lived to be 36 years of age, and never had a Doctors Bill to pay but once. . . My body as I said, is free from (through God's great mercy) considerable ailments; but yet I will know, that I have a Soul, that requires Surgeons skill continually, to keep togethar." He looked forward to returning to his native land, but the attraction of lucrative prizes kept him in the West Indias. On Friday, September 7, 1799, he was at Nevis Road, St. Kitts, and wrote "This evening I was taken very ill. -- remained on board untill the 22 Oct'r when I was oblidged to go to Sick Quarter ashore at Basseterre, St. Kitts." Thomas died between October 22, 1799 and October 26, 1799, the date of a final journal entry consisting of a list of the personal effects as "stated in the will of Aaron Thomas."

## Scope and content

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The journal of Aaron Thomas is a 374 page leather-bound volume containing approximately 367 pages of handwritten material. The journal begins on June 15, 1798 and concludes on October 26, 1799, and chronicles the experiences and adventures of a British seaman serving in the Royal Navy aboard HMS Lapwing in the West Indies during the French Revolutionary wars. The journal contains insightful, first-hand accounts of naval operations, customs of the day, and humorous, detailed anecdotes involving shipmates and superiors. Thomas, who joined the navy in 1793, includes entries regarding the health and punishment of the men aboard ship, as well as his personal views on slavery, religion, and morality. With the exception of the final three pages, all entries are written in Thomas's hand.

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## Notes

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### Title notes

### Arrangement

Approximately two hundred and forty pages of the diary are transcribed verbatim, with spelling and punctuation intact. Words appearing in italics are added to facilitate reading, and square brackets are used to identify unintelligible writing.

### Restrictions on access

This collection is open for research.

### Conditions governing use

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### Related material

Digital Resources and Online Exhibits : "Aaron Thomas: The Caribbean Journal of a Royal Navy Seaman"

Information about related materials is available at <http://scholar.library.miami.edu/thomas/>

### Other notes

- **Publication status:** Published
- **Description identifier:** ArchonInternalCollectionID:788

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## Access points

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- Great Britain. Royal Navy
  - Diaries (documentary form)
  - Manuscripts (documentary form)
  - Caribbean Area -- Description and travel (place)
  - West Indies -- Description and travel (place)
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## Series descriptions

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Ref code	Title	Dates	Access status	Container
id380781	File -			1