

Peter Adolph Grotjahn Memoir
1844-1846
Mss.B.G913

American Philosophical Society
2002
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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Title	Peter Adolph Grotjahn Memoir
Date [inclusive]	1844-1846
Call number	Mss.B.G913
Extent	1.0 Volume(s)
Extent	1 vol., 238p.; 0.2 linear feet
Location	LH-MV-E-2
Language	English
Container	1
Abstract	<p>After emigrating from Germany to Philadelphia in 1796, Peter Adolph Grotjahn established himself within the city's mercantile community, trading opportunistically both inland and coastwise as far as the Caribbean. In 1812, he began publishing a commercial newspaper, <i>Grotjan's Philadelphia Public Sale Reports</i> and he became increasingly active in local Democratic Party politics.</p> <p>The APS copy of Peter Grotjahn's memoir is a typescript copy of an original volume held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Written for his grandchildren, the memoir begins with a relatively brief genealogical discussion, but concentrates on his personal and political life and commercial experiences prior to 1817. The last section of the autobiography was completed posthumously from notes, and includes extracts from Grotjahn's diary as late as 1844.</p>

Preferred Citation

Cite as: Peter Adolph Grotjahn Memoir, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

Born into a well to do mercantile family in Hamburg, Germany, Peter Adolph Grotjan (1774-1850) had already gained considerable commercial experience before he decided to emigrate to the United States at the age of 22 to take advantage of what he saw as the greater opportunities. Settling in the nation's capitol, Philadelphia, Grotjahn drew upon his connections in Hamburg for consignments and quickly cultivated working relationships with a number of local merchants.

Within two years of his arrival, Grotjahn's stock had risen, figuratively, and he had established himself as a young entrepreneur. He formed a brief partnership with another young merchant F. H. Holtzbecher, which developed into a joint venture running a store in Reading. Although the arrangement lasted for only a little over a year, Grotjahn gained his first taste of Democratic politics in Reading and using his connections, he and Holtzbecher established connections with a clientele that reached across the state and beyond.

After the amicable dissolution of his partnership with Holtzbecher, Grotjahn returned to Philadelphia to resume business on his own. Despite a series of financial setbacks during the first decade of the 19th century caused by the defaulting of a few of his debtors, Grotjahn's trade expanded into the interior of Pennsylvania, and eventually to the ports on the Atlantic seaboard and the Caribbean. From 1812 to 1822, he published a commercial newspaper *Grotjan's Philadelphia Public Sale Reports*, using his position as an entree into Democratic Party politics. So committed was he to the party that he named his third son Thomas Jefferson Grotjahn. Although Grotjahn never held major public office, he helped found the Philadelphia Hickory Club in 1822, was involved in local elections, and twice served as Philadelphia County auditor, 1828-1836 and 1841-1844.

Scope & content

The APS copy of Peter Grotjahn's memoir is a typescript copy of an original volume held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Written for his grandchildren, the memoir begins with a relatively brief genealogical discussion, but concentrates on his personal and political life and commercial experiences prior to 1817. The last section of the autobiography was completed posthumously from notes, and includes extracts from Grotjahn's diary as late as 1844.

Written in an elliptical and anecdotal style, the memoir is filled with anecdotes and diversions regarding Grotjahn's recollections of his encounters with well known Philadelphians and other figures of national importance, from members of the mercantile community to George Washington, Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr. Fascinated by the social life of the elite in Philadelphia and Reading, Grotjahn manages to avoid deep insights while nevertheless telling an entertaining and often informative personal story. In addition to excellent accounts of the 1798 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, he provides an account of the riot in Reading that attended the visit of Albert Gallatin in 1798, written from the perspective of an arch-Democrat who rushed to Gallatin's aid.

The core of the journal, however, are his fine descriptions of travel in the central and western parts of the state on business, tours through Virginia and Washington, D.C., in 1799, and above all, his extended and eventful experiences in the Caribbean in 1804-1808. Taken captive by British privateers, Grotjahn saw more of Cuba and Jamaica than he could have imagined, and his descriptions of life in St. Jago and Baracoa are particularly valuable.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2002

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Acquired from William H. Allen, October 1978.

Processing Information

Recatalogued by rsc, 2003.

Original Location

The original volumes of the Grotjahn Memoir are located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (collection 252). The first volume contains notes and memoranda used in preparing the memoir.

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Autobiographies
- Autobiography
- Travel Narratives and Journals

Geographic Name(s)

- Cuba--Description and travel--19th century
- Jamaica--Description and travel--19th century
- Pennsylvania--Description and travel--18th century
- Philadelphia (Pa.)--Politics and government--19th century
- Philadelphia (Pa.)--Social life and customs--19th century

- Reading (Pa.)--Description and travel
- Washington (D.C.)--Description and travel--19th century
- West Indies--Description and travel--19th century

Personal Name(s)

- Burr, Aaron, 1756-1836
- Gallatin, Albert, 1761-1849
- Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826
- Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westpahlia, 1784-1860
- Rush, Benjamin, 1746-1813

Subject(s)

- Cholera--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia
- Early National Politics
- Germans--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia
- International Travel
- Lemon Hill (Estate : Philadelphia, Pa.)
- Merchants--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia
- Printing and Publishing
- Privateers--Jamaica
- Travel
- War of 1812
- Woodlands (Estate : Philadelphia, Pa.)
- Yellow fever--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia

Other Descriptive Information

This collection is a typescript copy of a Peter Grotjahn's personal memoirs held at the HSP. The anecdotes, most of which date from the early republic, capture aspects of life in Philadelphia during this period. Grotjahn makes references to many prominent individuals. Grotjahn led an adventurous life, which included travel throughout the Mid-Atlantic states and to the Caribbean (where he was briefly impressed by British privateers).