



PRESS RELEASE

New York State
Unified Court System

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Hundreds of Thousands of NY Court Records to Be Transferred to State Archives to Increase Public Access to Historical Documents Spanning Three Centuries

New York – Chief Judge Janet DiFiore, State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and State Archivist Thomas Ruller today announced that the New York State Unified Court System is transferring nearly 2,000 boxes and bound volumes of paper and parchment court records – many dating back to early colonial times – to the New York State Archives. The Archives is a unit of the State Education Department responsible for managing and preserving state government records documenting the history of New York. The transfer is expected to be completed next week, and the historical records will be stored and made available to the public at the State Archives' facility in the Cultural Education Center in Albany.

For the past century, these old court records have been stored in the Hall of Records at 31 Chambers Street in lower Manhattan. Since 1942 they have been under the care of the New York County Clerk. The records comprise mostly civil case documents from the Supreme Court of Judicature, a common-law court founded in 1691 and the predecessor to the current Supreme Court of New York State; and the Court of Chancery, an equity court established in 1683, whose jurisdiction was merged into that of the new Supreme Court when it was created in 1847. The State Archives already holds the extensive records of the upstate offices of the pre-1847 statewide trial courts, which were transferred to the Archives by the Court of Appeals in 1982. The current transfer of records filed in New York City will consolidate in one location all records of the old Supreme Court of Judicature and the Court of Chancery.

The records being transferred to the State Archives represent a virtual Who's Who of early American patriots, many of whom practiced as lawyers or judges in these early courts, among them Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and Robert R. Livingston, one of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence.

These papers and parchments tell the ordinary stories of human conflict, from contract disputes and disagreements over estates to the often tawdry divorce proceedings of early New York (infidelity had to be proved for a court to grant a divorce). These court archives reflect the legal, social, economic and cultural forces at work in New York from the 1600s into the mid-1800s, including changes in the practice of law and the conception of justice. One of the most important cases documented in this historic collection is that of *The King v. John Peter Zenger*, a seminal freedom-of-the-press case of the 1730s that influenced early American political thought on the law of libel and the powers of juries.

"These historic court documents are a state and national treasure, providing invaluable insight into New York's rich legal, social and cultural history over the course of three centuries. I am so pleased that these vintage records will now be part of the voluminous collection of the New York State Archives, which is dedicated to organizing and preserving the state's historical records, and where these prized court documents will be readily accessible to researchers, scholars, teachers and the general public," said Chief Judge DiFiore.

"The State Archives cares for more than 200 million documents in its collections," said Board of Regents Chancellor Betty A. Rosa. "These historical court records are an important addition to the State Archives collection. I encourage New York's students, adults and educators alike to use these documents to learn about the legal, social and cultural history of New York."

"By maintaining historical records, we preserve our history for future generations," said State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia. "We're proud to make these historical documents accessible to the public. I encourage all New Yorkers, including historians and genealogists studying New York State's history, to examine and research these valuable documents."

"We thank the New York State Unified Court System for its cooperation and collaboration in this transfer project," said State Archivist Thomas Ruller. "The State Archives' mission is to preserve and make available the essential documents that embody New York's rich history. These materials will provide a tremendous resource for research and the creation of new knowledge about our State and its development."

The State Archives is located in the Cultural Education Center, Empire State Plaza. The Archives maintains a public research room that is open to the public Monday through Saturday,

9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The records will be available for research after they are transferred. More information on the records is available through the State Archives' website:
www.archives.nysed.gov.

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