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# The New Jersey Early Land Records Project



**West Jersey Proprietors' deposit at the New Jersey State Archives.** Above: Detail of a survey naming William Hunt, Nathaniel Pope/Poepe, William Richards, and John Garrett, dated 30 January 1700. Below: The originals are being carefully unfolded, flattened, and rehoused in archival storage materials.



In September 2016, the New Jersey State Archives (NJSA) and the Genealogical Society of New Jersey (GSNJ) launched a partnership to support an ongoing project at NJSA to complete an index to all pre-1786 land records found in collections at NJSA. These documents number more than 80,000, and include records of the East and West Jersey Proprietors as well as colonial land instruments recorded at the county level into the 1800s. The index will cover more than 60 collections, all in one comprehensive and free database.

### The Collections

In 1664, the Dutch surrendered the colony of New Netherland to the British. James, Duke of York (later King James II), transferred authority over the land between the Hudson and Delaware rivers to two Proprietors—Sir George Carteret and John, Lord Berkeley. Carteret's and Berkeley's successors later divided the province into two colonies, separating East and West New Jersey by a "province line." The land was ultimately purchased by investors and settlers who formed corporate proprietorships. After surrendering governance rights in 1703, these shareholding bodies retained their land through the Revolutionary War and up to recent times.

The Proprietors of East Jersey dissolved in 1998, transferring their remaining acreage rights and their records to the State. The Proprietors of West Jersey continues operations today and is the oldest corporation in New Jersey, if not possibly internationally. In 2005, they placed their records on deposit with NJSA. For over a decade, NJSA has been processing, indexing, and conserving these irreplaceable records as resources have allowed.

The transfer and deposit of these records means unprecedented access to early settlement information for New Jersey genealogists. For the first time in the state's history, the great majority of colonial land surveys are in one location. (The Duke of York's original 1664 grant of the Colony of New Jersey to Carteret and Berkeley, and the 1677 Concessions and Agreements—both national treasures—are just two examples from the remarkable archive of the West Jersey Proprietors now on deposit in Trenton. The Duke's grant was proudly exhibited at the State House in Trenton during the New Jersey 350th Anniversary celebrations in 2014.)

The primary goal of the project is to expand the State Archives "Early Land Records" database to include index data from the following groups of collections:

- NJSA's collective series of original (signed) land records, 1660s+ (roughly 1,200 documents)
- West Jersey Proprietors' surveys, warrants, and deeds, 1660s+ (over 32,000 documents)
- East Jersey Proprietors' surveys, warrants, and deeds, 1660s+ (roughly 17,500 documents)
- Provincial Secretary's/Secretary of State's deeds and surveys, 1650s+ (nearly 20,000 documents)



Processing Archivist Greg “Rusty” Smith unboxing folded original West Jersey deeds, assessing the condition, and refolding documents in archival materials.



- County deeds and mortgages, 1660s–1786 (about 10,250 documents)

Note that New Jersey's northern boundary during much of the colonial period extended into present-day New York State. Thus, families considered to have settled in what is now New York may be documented in these records—especially in Orange, Richmond, and Rockland Counties. There are also many transactions recorded in New Jersey that include properties in New York City or parties who resided in New York City.

### Processing and Indexing

The inclusion of the records of the East and West Jersey Proprietors and certain county land records in NJSA's database will create a single statewide resource spanning the entire colonial period. Processing and indexing the proprietors' surveys is a complicated and labor-intensive task. The loose surveys of the East Jersey Proprietors are already processed, but only start in the 1780s (early surveys are recorded in books). The West Jersey loose surveys, on the other hand, date back to the 1680s. They are folded multiple times and grouped in small boxes. Processing begins with each document being carefully removed, unfolded, flattened, assessed for damage, and then rehoused in archival folders and mylar (if need be). The documents are works of art in their own right, containing beautifully-drawn maps.

NJSA is conducting its indexing in phases. The first phase entails basic data entry including names of the parties, location, acreage, data, and citation. The second phase will include advanced data entry, extracting additional names (for example, adjacent property owners, persons mentioned in the chain of title, and witnesses), additional place references and landmarks, etc. The latter, more intensive work, requires a higher level of skill reading the colonial script and understanding the “legalese.”

### Conservation

The New Jersey Early Land Records Project also involves conservation treatment for key documents. Three items of great significance are already being treated by the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia. They include West Jersey Surveyor General Daniel Leeds' first book of surveys from the 1680s; Dame Elizabeth Carteret's 1682 release of East New Jersey to the trustees of her late husband, Sir George Carteret; and the “Indian deed” for what is essentially present-day Gloucester County. This last document was discovered among the folded-up West Jersey “loose papers,” and contains the original marks and seals of the Indian sachems (chiefs). Funding for conservation of the first two documents was received in the form of a grant to GSNJ from the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of New Jersey. Funding to restore the Gloucester County Indian deed came from local



Database Archivist Vivian Thiele records details from a 1718/1720 deed into the database, including multiple dates, names, and notations made by surveyors. Thiele can identify the handwriting of the surveyors, from the smallest marks and notations, through her familiarity with the documents in the collection and professional experience with reading colonial script.



corporate donations (see below). Leeds' survey book will be digitally imaged as part of the conservation work, enabling its contents to be fully indexed in the database. The other two (large) manuscripts will receive sealed packaging after repairs and framing for exhibition.

### Digitization

Another ambitious goal of the project is to create about 30,000 digital images of land documents to be posted online for free access through the database. This includes pre-1704 (Proprietary Period) deed and surveys from the Provincial Secretary's record books; bound surveys from the East Jersey Proprietors' records books for the colonial period; NJSA's collection of original (signed) deeds; and selected colonial county land records.

### Staffing and Fundraising

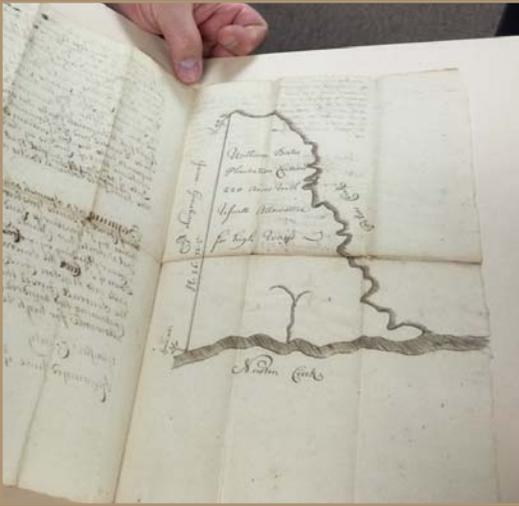
GSNJ is excited to be a part of this ongoing project, which will be invaluable to New Jersey family history researchers. The project was conceived by NJSA Executive Director and GSNJ Vice President, Joseph R. Klett, who oversaw the deposit and transfer of the records of the East and West Jersey Proprietors to NJSA. By speaking about the land records to various constituent groups and writing extensively about the collections, he has gained the support of numerous private donors and grantees. The following NJSA staff members are also directly involved in the project: Vivian Thiele (overseeing data entry); Veronica Calder (overseeing digitization); Ellen Callahan (overseeing conservation); Jon Bozard (data entry); Greg "Rusty" Smith (processing West Jersey loose papers); and Darlene Blackwell (scanning). GSNJ Trustee Michelle Novak is managing the project on the GSNJ side, with support from Treasurer Scott Holmes and President C. Arthur Lawton III.

In the fall of 2016, a number of New Jersey professional associations, organizations, businesses, and individuals generously donated to the Project, contributing more than \$53,000 in grants and seed money. These include:

- The Society of Colonial Wars in the State of New Jersey
- The New Jersey Land Title Association
- Signature Information Solutions
- Priority Search Services
- Western Technologies Group
- State Capital Title and Abstract Company
- New Jersey Society of Professional Land Surveyors
- The Grabas Institute for Continuing Education
- Taylor, Wiseman & Taylor
- Matthew O. Uzzle

GSNJ is also awaiting determination on a federal grant proposal to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and looking into other possible funding sources.

In December 2016, GSNJ launched a dedicated website for the project, which includes more information about the records and the



Detail of the resurvey of William Bates' family plantation on Newton Creek (now in the City of Camden), 1733. (West Jersey Proprietors' deposit at the New Jersey State Archives.)

project, short videos about the collections, and a case study, and a presentation by Klett. Donations to support the project can be made through the website.

Please help us spread the word about New Jersey's unique and fascinating early land records.



#### Further Reading

View additional images of the records and Project overview videos at the New Jersey Early Land Records Project website, [www.njlandrecords.org](http://www.njlandrecords.org)

As documents are processed, they are added to the New Jersey State Archives database of Early Land Records, 1650–1801

<https://www.net1.state.nj.us/DOS/Admin/ArchivesDBPortal/NJProprietors.aspx>

Using the Records of the East and West Jersey Proprietors, by Joseph R. Klett, [www.nj.gov/state/archives/pdf/proprietors.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/state/archives/pdf/proprietors.pdf)

#### Donating to the New Jersey Early Land Records Project

We encourage all those with an interest in New Jersey history—individuals, societies, foundations, and companies—to help support this project which will make more than 80,000 early land records accessible to researchers.

Donors may contribute to the general Early Land Records Project fund or underwrite a grant to support specific conservation efforts. Donations may be made via credit card through GSNJ's online store at [www.gsnj.org](http://www.gsnj.org) or via check to GSNJ, New Jersey Early Land Records, P.O. Box 1476, Trenton, NJ 08607.

Contributions may be tax-deductible (please consult your tax professional).

For more information, contact the New Jersey Early Land Records Project Administrator, GSNJ Trustee Michelle D. Novak at [landrecords@gsnj.org](mailto:landrecords@gsnj.org), 917-363-1521, or visit the project website at [www.njlandrecords.org](http://www.njlandrecords.org).