

AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY  
MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

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**NAME OF COLLECTION:**

Bascom, Ruth Henshaw, Papers, 1789-1848

**LOCATION(S):**

Octavo vols. "B"  
Misc. mss. boxes "B"

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**SIZE OF COLLECTION:**

54 octavo volumes; 1 folder (3 items)

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**SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON COLLECTION:**

See accompanying sheets for additional information.

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**SOURCE OF COLLECTION:**

The diaries are the gift of Miss Mary D. Thurston and Miss Caroline L. Thurston, 1948. The photocopies of Ruth Bascom's will and estate inventory were purchased from the Probate Court in Cambridge, Mass., 1980.

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**COLLECTION DESCRIPTION:**

Ruth Henshaw Bascom (1772-1848) was born in Leicester, Mass., the daughter of William (1735-1820) and Phebe Swan Henshaw (1753-1808). Her father was an influential Leicester resident, and Ruth Henshaw grew up as a member of a large and very active family. In 1804 she married Dr. Asa Miles (1762-1805), a physician who had graduated from Dartmouth College. They lived in Westminister, Mass., until his death, after which she returned to her family in Leicester.

In 1806 she married the Rev. Ezekiel Lysander Bascom (1779?-1841). They had no children, but Ruth Bascom raised his only child by his second marriage, Priscilla Elvira Bascom Philbrick (1803- ), as well as the son of the Rev. Bascom's sister, Eunice Loveland ( -1810), after she committed suicide. The child took the name, Lysander Bascom (1803- ), and eventually married Lucretia Tholman ( -1839) of Concord, Mass.

The Rev. Bascom served as minister of the Congregational Church in Phillipston, Mass., for twenty-one years. In 1820 he was dismissed by his congregation and the Bascoms moved to Ashby, Mass., where he served a church for fourteen years. The latter part of his career he became a Unitarian. After his retirement, Bascom spent winters in Savannah, Ga., with his daughter, but Ruth Bascom stayed in New England visiting with friends and relatives. Around 1839 they moved to Fitzwilliam, N.H., where he seems to have served a church on a semi-retired basis. He died there in 1841. His wife spent her remaining years boarding in Ashby and traveling throughout Massachusetts and Maine.

The last entry in her diary for 1828 notes that she had kept a journal since 1789. There are two volumes for 1805; the following years are missing: 1795, 1798, 1811, 1815, 1822, 1838, and 1844. This collection begins with the first diary in 1789 and continues through 1846. The earliest volumes tend to be the least complete--there are gaps in the coverage and many of the leaves are torn and fragile. For most years, however, there is an entry for each day that records the weather and her activities. Her time was occupied, as a young girl, by classes and special programs at Leicester Academy, social activities, housework, and family occasions. After her marriage to the Rev. Bascom, she spent much of her time helping her husband fulfill his ministerial responsibilities. She carefully recorded his sermon topics, funerals, and marriage ceremonies. Until she began doing pastel portraits and silhouettes the latter part of her life, most of her energy was devoted to visiting, watching the sick, serving on local library and temperance societies, and doing household tasks.

In 1801 she made what appears to be the first entry concerning the profiles for which she is famous. The frequency of these entries increases in the 1820s and 1830s. There are only a few notations of receiving money for her sketches, but there are occasional records of what she spent for art supplies, e.g., the construction of frames for her profiles. Most of the sketches were done for neighbors and relatives, probably as presents for them or their families. Some of the profiles were of deceased children and babies, sketched as remembrances for the parents, and others were done for strangers who had heard of Bascom's ability.

In 1816 she began recording the vital statistics for the town in which she lived and, at the same time, she started to keep personal accounts. These records gradually expanded to include births, deaths, marriages, lists of their visitors (how long they stayed and how many meals they consumed), lists of letters received and sent, and expenses.

Both Bascoms traveled a great deal, and she made detailed entries about the trips. Most of them were by stagecoach and she recorded the route, number of passengers and their destinations, stops, road conditions, etc. In 1801 to 1802 she traveled to Virginia. Later in her life, Ruth Bascom made frequent and extended visits to Leicester, Boston, and parts of Maine.

Two of the volumes were kept by her sister, Catherine Henshaw (1784-1806). The only diary for 1804 was written by Catherine (from February 13-December 6), but there are two diaries for 1805, one by each girl. Catherine's is incomplete after May.

There is little reflection in the diaries, one notable exception being the entry at the end of the 1810 journal. There is often some very general reflection about the passing of time and Christian duty at the beginning and end of each year. The diaries are most valuable for their wealth of detail about the daily course of events. Unusual events, such as general elections, are frequently noted, and natural disasters are given their due. But the emphasis, over the course of fifty-seven years, is on local events, sickness and death, visiting, her artwork, and the weather.

The folder contains the following photocopies: Ruth Henshaw Bascom's will, 24 November 1846; her estate inventory, 10 May 1848; and a checklist of portraits painted by Bascom (organized in alphabetical order by subject), and a bibliography, both prepared by Mary Eileen Egan for her thesis, Ruth Henshaw Bascom, New England Portraitist (Senior Honors Thesis, College of the Holy Cross, 1980).

See Contents List.

**American Antiquarian Society**  
**MANUSCRIPTS DEPARTMENT**

RUTH HENSHAW BASCOM, PAPERS, 1789-1848  
CONTENTS LIST

Octavo VOLUME	CONTENTS	Octavo VOLUME	CONTENTS
<b><u>Ruth Henshaw Bascom, Diaries, 1789 - 1846</u></b>			
1	1789	26	1819
2	1790	27	1820
3	1791	28	1821
4	1792	29	1823
5	1793	30	1824
6	1794	31	1825
7	1796	32	1826
8	1797	33	1827
9	1799	34	1828
10	1800	35	1829
11	1801	36	1830
12	1802	37	1831
13	1803	38	1832
14	1805	39	1833
15	1806	40	1834
16	1807	41	1835
17	1808	42	1836
18	1809	43	1837
19	1810	44	1839
20	1812	45	1840
21	1813	46	1841
22	1814	47	1842
23	1816	48	1843
24	1817	49	1845
25	1818	50	1846
<b><u>Catherine Henshaw, Diaries, 1804-1805</u></b>			
51	1804	52	1805
<b><u>Miscellaneous Materials</u></b>			
53	Loose items	54	Newspaper clippings, misc. notes

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RUTH HENSHAW BASCOM, PAPERS, 1789-1848  
OTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE COLLECTION

Sources of information on collection:

For information on Ruth Henshaw Bascom, see Clara E. Sears, *Some American Primitives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1841), pp. 118-125; for information on Ezekiel L. Bascom, see William Lord, *"Historical Address ... at the Celebration of the 150th Anniversary ... of the town of Phillipston, Mass."* 1936, pp. 26-28. See also **Worcester Art Museum Bulletin**, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 3, May 1976.

Studies focusing on materials in this collection:

Dawson, Susanne M., and M. Susan Barger, *"Painted on Frances' Copy: Profiles of Ruth Henshaw Bascom," Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, 120(8), 692-3, 706, 710.

Egan, Mary Eileen, *Ruth Henshaw Bascom, New England Portraitist* (Thesis, College of the Holy Cross, 1980).

Fouratt, Mary Eileen, *"Ruth Henshaw Bascom, Itinerant Portraitist," Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife*, 9 (1984) (Boston: 1986), 190-211 (includes checklist of extant portraits, pp. 208-211).

Roeber, A. Gregg, *"A New England Woman's Perspective on Norfolk Virginia, 1801-1802: Excerpts from the Diary of Ruth Henshaw Bascom," PAAS*, 88 (1978), 277-325.

Other information:

Also available on microfilm as part of the **American Women's Diaries: New England**. (New York, N.Y.: Readex Film Products, [1984?]).