The New Jersey Early Land Records Project

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 continue operations today and are 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 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.”
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)
- 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 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) deeds 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

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

In December 2016, GSNJ launched a dedicated website for the project, which includes more information about the records and the project, short videos about the collections, and a case study and 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

As documents are processed, they are added to the New Jersey State Archives database of Early Land Records, 1650–1801, https://www.nwr1.state.nj.us/DOS/Admin/ArchivesDBPortal/NJProprietors.aspx


“New Jersey 1609-1680 European Settlement” and “East and West Jersey, 1686 and 1700,” from The Story of New Jersey’s Civil Boundaries 1606–1968, by John F. Snyder. The indispensable guide to early New Jersey county and town boundaries is available at www.state.nj.us/dep/njgs/enviroed/oldpubs/bulletin67.pdf
The New Jersey Early Land Records Project
First Year Milestones

In September 2016, GSNJ entered into a partnership with the New Jersey State Archives (NJSA) to raise funds and assist in the administration of the “New Jersey Early Land Records Project.” This ambitious, multi-year endeavor will index and digitize (partially) more than 80,000 colonial and proprietary land documents in over 60 collections. This constitutes the earliest of all such records in the State. One year into the project, the NJSA and GSNJ are pleased to report major progress on several fronts:

Project Overview
The basic goal of the project is to create a single, comprehensive online index to deeds, surveys, and other land records spanning the entire colonial period in New Jersey from 1664–1785. This includes record books and manuscript filings of the colonial and county governments as well as the East and West New Jersey proprietors. Within the larger plan of work are a number of sub-projects. In addition to data entry, these entail conservation of several monumental items, digitization of at least 10,000 documents, and full abstracting of a selection of early transactions.

The work is off to a strong start while funds raised have enabled the NJSA to double the staffing allocated to the Project and provide for needed archival supplies. About a quarter of the records are being flattened and read for the first time in centuries.

Processing and Indexing
As of the last week of October 2017, the Project staff have indexed roughly 29,000 documents, adding over 83,000 name entries to the Early Land Records database on the NJSA website (https://wwwnet-dos.state.nj.us/DOS_ArchivesDBPortal/EarlyLandRecords.aspx). New data is uploaded to the publicly accessible index as it is entered into the database.

Digitization
An important goal of the Project is to scan and make available online as many records as the budget will allow.

The NJSA is pleased to announce that three books from the Secretary of State’s deeds and surveys are now online free of charge to researchers. This equates to more than 640 PDF files linked to database records in this initial offering. The records are being prioritized for digitization based on indexing priority and microfilm image quality. The first three books digitized are from West Jersey:
- Basse’s Book of Surveys, Parts A & B, 1687–1717
- Nevill’s Deeds, Book A, 1684–1692

The digital files containing the contents of these volumes are now connected to the corresponding database entries. This allows researchers to get virtually “hands-on” with the primary sources.

If the entry has a corresponding digitized record, “View PDF” will appear in the right-hand column. If the entry does not have a digitized component, you can click on “Select” to add it to your cart and order a copy from NJSA (see page 16). Copies cost $5 per record and can be ordered online using a credit card.

Discoveries
Many surprises have been encountered during the unboxing and processing of individual records, including the discovery of hitherto unknown transactions and stories of individuals. Some of these will be reported on in future issues of GSNJ Newsletter and at the Project website. One notable discovery was recently made in the loose papers of the West Jersey Proprietors: the original 1677 Indian deed for the vast tract of land along the Delaware River that is present-day

What are the Records of the East and West Jersey Proprietors?
After the takeover of New Netherlands by the British in 1664, the Province of New Jersey was formed and two noblemen, Sir George Carteret and Lord John Berkeley, were given exclusive rights to distribute land as they saw fit. Eventually, a line was surveyed from Little Egg Harbor northwesterly through the territory, forming the separate colonies of East and West Jersey. Corporations of shareholders succeeded to Carteret’s and Berkeley’s land rights, i.e., the proprietors of East and West New Jersey, respectively. The East Jersey Proprietors dissolved in 1998, while the West Jersey Proprietors continue as a legal entity today. The two proprietorships recorded more than 40,000 transactions between them—documenting the names of original settlers, neighboring landowners, inheritance and chain of title, and the transfer and division of proprietary rights.

The NJSA acquired the East Jersey records in 1998, with the State’s acquisition of the former proprietors’ land rights. In 2005, the West Jersey Proprietors placed their records on deposit at NJSA. Since that time, NJSA has been unboxing, processing, conserving, and indexing these critically important historical records.
Gloucester County. The indenture bears the original marks and seals of the local Indian chiefs.

**Start-Up Funding**
The engine of any project is funding. During our first year, a number of New Jersey professional associations, organizations, businesses, and individuals generously contributed nearly $80,000 in start-up funds. Donors 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

These grants and donations enabled NJSA to hire dedicated data-entry contractors, purchase supplies, and acquire a large-format scanner for digitizing thousands of original documents. Representatives of the funders and other constituent interest groups form the Project’s Advisory Board.

A large portion of the start-up funding came in the form of two grants from the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of New Jersey (SCWNJ)—an organization that commemorates and preserves records, structures, and artifacts from our colonial past so that future generations will have access to them. SCWNJ funded professional conservation treatment for the aforementioned 1677 Indian deed and two other key items: 1) Dame Elizabeth Carteret’s 1683 release of rights to the eastern half of New Jersey to the trustees of her late husband, Sir George Carteret; and 2) Daniel Leeds’ Book of West Jersey Surveys, No. 1, c1680–1709. The former is an exquisite parchment bearing Dame Carteret’s original signature—perhaps the only one in America. The latter contains invaluable early transactions recorded by one of the first surveyors general. Prior to the book’s treatment, which included disbinding, restoration of the pages, and digitization, its contents were essentially inaccessible due to the fragile condition of the folios and tight binding. Conservation now allows for full indexing from the digital images.

**Federal Grant Application**
In December 2016, GSNJ applied to the National Archives’ National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) seeking substantial funding for the Project. Our proposal was supported by a number of other genealogical organizations, including the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, the New England Historical Genealogical Society, and the National Genealogical Society. In the spring of 2017, we were notified that our proposal was approved in two parts. The first part, now underway, provides $42,000 for data entry from East Jersey Proprietors’ records and pre-1785 land documents recorded at the county and local level. The second part of the grant, for nearly $54,000, is conditioned upon changes in the depository status of the West Jersey Proprietors’...
records, which the NJSA is working to satisfy. We are honored and excited to have the NHPRC’s support for this landmark project—a national vote of confidence in our partnership with NJSA.

Since the start of the Project, individuals have also donated through the link at the GSNJ store. We thank everyone for their generous contributions!

**Next Steps**
The Project website will be updated frequently. We plan to promote the Project in the mainstream and genealogical press to raise awareness about this period in New Jersey’s history and the value of these materials. If you, your Society, or company would like to make a donation to the Project, visit www.njlandrecords.org, or send a check to:

New Jersey Early Land Records Project, c/o GSNJ, PO Box 1476, Trenton, NJ 08607.

Learn more about this exciting NJSA-GSNJ project: see pictures and video, and keep on top of developments at www.njlandrecords.org. Updates will be posted soon and news shared via GSNJ’s website and GSNJ’s Facebook page (www.facebook.com/GSNJfb/).

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**Accessing the Early Land Records Database**
https://www.nj.net-dos.state.nj.us/DOS_ArchivesDBPortal/EaryLandRecords.aspx

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Names and details are uploaded to the database as they are completed.

You can search the database on a number of parameters. If the name you are looking for is in the database, it will auto-suggest it as you type into the field.

**S** If an image has not yet been scanned, “Select” will appear in the left-hand column. Copies may be ordered for $5.00 per record and clicking “Select” will add it to your shopping cart.

**V** If a record has been digitized, “View PDF” will appear in the right-hand column. Digitized records are supplied free of charge and may be downloaded immediately from the site.

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 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, 917-363-1521, or visit the project website at www.njlandrecords.org.

www.njlandrecords.org

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Society of Colonial Wars in the State of New Jersey

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New Jersey State Archives
225 West State Street | Trenton, NJ 08607 | www.nj.gov/state/archives/

The Genealogical Society of New Jersey
P.O. Box 1476 | Trenton, NJ 08607 | www.gsnj.org

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