

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Coming face-to-face with history: It's personal

Editor's note: This article was written by Jaye Alderson of Ripon College and editor of Ripon Magazine. It appeared in the Spring 2024 issue of the magazine and is reprinted with permission. Since the article appeared it was learned that Ripon resident and former teacher Al Mortenson is also related to John Hart.

When Ripon College student Aaron O'Halloran '24 joined his "MST 215: Controversies and Contexts of Museum Studies" classmates on a visit to Lane Library, he made a family connection.

While looking at the college's Robert S. Hagge Signature Collection, O'Halloran observed the signature of his own seventh-great-grandfather, John Hart. Hart was a politician in colonial New Jersey and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The Robert S. Hagge Signature Collection includes signatures by all U.S. presidents from George Washington through George W. Bush and 26 signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Hagge was a trustee of Ripon College and donated the collection in 1968. Later, presidential signatures were added.

"All of the signatures from before JFK should be done by hand," Ripon College professor of art history Travis Nygard said. "After that, it is possible that some were done with an 'autopen,' which is a machine that holds a pen and can write a signature for someone using a template. I suspect that some of the recent ones are autopen signatures, but since the machine holds are real pen or marker, it can be hard to tell, even with a magnifying glass!"

Ripon College's signature of John Hart appears to be on colonial currency from New Jersey, where Hart was a politician. Nygard noted that Hart signed a substantial amount of currency.

"The signature is real, almost certainly done with a feather quill as metal nibs for pens had not been invented yet," Nygard says. "The ink is dark-brown, so it was probably made by boiling walnuts or something similar."

"I had no idea that Aaron had ancestors in colonial America, and as the class looked at documents, I was just rattling off the



RIPON COLLEGE'S AARON O'Halloran '24 holds a signature from his seventh-great-grandfather, John Hart, who was a politician in colonial New Jersey and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He stumbled upon it while taking a class at Ripon College. *Ripon College photos*

names of people whose signatures are in the college's collection. I could not have been more surprised when he suddenly exclaimed that he was descended from John Hart. It was a lot of fun to discover the personal connection as I had assumed that we would just be having an intellectual experience about early American history."

O'Halloran noted that he discovered the family connection with Hart when he asked relatives about his family history for a fifth-grade project. O'Halloran is descended from Daniel Hart, one of John Hart's 13 children.

"Being the history buff that I am, I found it very cool and have learned everything I could about [John Hart] since then,"

he said.

Seeing Hart's signature in person "was kind of surreal" for O'Halloran.

"I was holding something that I had only seen pictures of on the Internet. It was really cool finding something here at Ripon that is important both to our nation's history and my family."

O'Halloran, who is from Oshkosh, graduated in May, majoring in political science and history. He plans to earn a Ph.D. in history and become a professor.

"Making my own contribution to the history field and sharing my passion with others," he said of his goals.

Although not on display, the collection may be viewed by

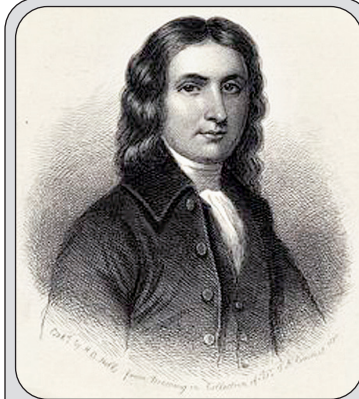
appointment with Ripon College Lane Library director and archivist Andrew Prellwitz.

The Robert S. Hagge Signature Collection at Ripon College is just one example of the large collection of historical items that may be found in Ripon.

Both Ripon College and the Ripon Historical Society maintain archives which reflect on the community's historical involvement in both the state and nation.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.



Who was John Hart?

John Hart was a politician in colonial New Jersey. He was born in 1713 and died in 1779. He was a delegate to the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Hart served in the New Jersey Colonial Assembly; as a judge on the Court of Common Pleas, where he was often called "Honest John;" as vice president of New Jersey's revolutionary assembly (or provincial congress); as elected speaker of the newly formed New Jersey General Assembly; and on several other governmental committees.

In June 1778, prior to the Battle of Monmouth, he invited George Washington and the 12,000 men of the Continental Army to encamp on his farm, and he had lunch there with Washington.

He died before the end of the Revolutionary War. His obituary read: "JOHN HART, Esq. the Representative in General Assembly for the county of Hunterdon, and late Speaker of that House. He had served in the Assembly for many years under the former government, taken an early and active part in the present revolution, and continued to the day he was seized with his last illness to discharge the duties of a faithful and upright patriot in the service of his country in general and the county he represented in particular. The universal approbation of his character and conduct among all ranks of people, is the best testimony of his worth, and as it must make his death regretted and lamented, will ensure lasting respect to his memory."

His descendants include Congressman John Hart Brewer, former House majority leader Steny Hoyer — and Ripon College's Aaron O'Halloran '24.

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