

**John Van Schaick Lansing Pruyn (1811-1877)  
Papers, 1824-1928****SC10762**

**QUANTITY:** 13 Boxes (4.0 cubic ft.)  
**ACCESS:** Open to research  
**ACQUISITION:** Donated to New York State Library by William Gorham Rice, August 1938 and January 1943. See provenance note for details.  
**ALTERNATIVE FORMAT:** Selected documents as noted in the inventory are also available on microfilm: MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 (4 reels)  
**PROCESSED BY:** Elizabeth Hoag, Student Intern, College of Saint Rose, June 1991; revised November 2012

**Biographical Note:**

*Genealogical background information provided by Peter Christoph.*

The Pruyn family of Albany is one of the oldest and most esteemed families in the area. The family is of a Holland-Dutch background and was one of the original Dutch families in the area. One of the earliest ancestors of the Pruyns was Casparus Pruyn. He was born in Albany in 1734. His son, David Pruyn (1771-1843) married Hibertje Lansing (1773-1855), the daughter of Christopher Lansing (1743-1819), thus establishing the family name of Hibertje and the connection to the Lansing family. David and Hibertje had three children: Catherine (1803-1885), Lansing (1805-1877) and John Van Schaick Lansing (1811-1877).

John Van Schaick Lansing (John V.S.L.) Pruyn was born on January 22, 1811, in Albany, New York. In 1824 he entered the Albany Academy and upon graduation went to the law offices of James King, a prominent Albany attorney. In 1831 Pruyn was admitted to the bar, and by 1836 he had been appointed an examiner in chancery and then master in chancery. In 1848 Pruyn was admitted as counsel to the United States Supreme Court.

John V.S.L. Pruyn then moved his interest from law to business, eventually becoming counsel and director of the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad Company. In 1853 he served as one of the chief architects of the consolidation agreement that merged ten small railroad companies into the New York Central Railroad. He served this company as secretary, treasurer, and general counsel until 1866. Other principal business positions included serving as a trustee for the Mutual Life Insurance Company and a director in the Union Trust Company.

In politics Pruyn served in the New York State Senate from 1862 to 1863, and in the Thirty-eighth (1863-1865) and Fortieth (1867-1869) Congresses as a representative of the Albany district in Washington. Pruyn was a delegate to at least two Democratic presidential conventions and attended several other national and state Democratic conventions.

In 1831 Pruyn was elected a member of the Albany Institute and served as president from 1857 until his death. In 1844 he was appointed a Regent of the University of the State of New York and was elected Chancellor in 1862. During this time he was actively involved in the founding of the Dudley Observatory. In 1867 the Governor appointed Pruyn to the State Board of Charities, and he was then elected president by his fellow members. From 1865 to 1873 Pruyn served on a commission to design and build a new capitol; he had been instrumental in getting the law passed that created this commission.

John V.S.L. Pruyn attended St. Peter's Episcopal Church of which he was elected a vestryman in 1861. He also served as president of the board of trustees of St. Stephen's College at Annandale, a college associated with his church. He died November 21, 1877, in Clifton Springs, New York, following a long illness.

Pruyn was married twice. His first wife was the niece of Erastus Corning, Harriet Corning Turner (1822-1859). Harriet gave birth to six children, of which, only two lived into adulthood. The first child, Erastus Corning Pruyn (1841-1881) died of meningitis on the Canary Islands. The second child, Harriet Catherine, died as a child of scarlet fever. The third and fourth children, May Weld, and Harriet Corning, died as babies. The fifth child was a stillborn male. The sixth child was John V.S.L. Pruyn, Jr. Harriet died shortly after giving birth to him.

John's second wife was Anna Fen Parker (1840-1909). She gave birth to two girls: Harriet Langdon Pruyn (1868-1939), married into the Rice family, and Huybertie Lansing Pruyn (1873-1964), married into the Hamlin family.

John Van Schaick Lansing Pruyn, Jr. (1859-1904) became a lawyer like his father. He attended Miss Gaylord's school in Catskill, St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, and Union College, from which he graduated in 1880 or 1881. He later attended Albany Law School. Like his father, John was also an active member of the Albany community. He was a member of the Fort Orange Club in Albany and the Metropolitan Club in New York City. He was Alderman-at-Large of Albany in 1887-1888, vice president of the St. Stephen's College in Barrytown, and a member of the Holland Society and the St. Nicholas Society. During the last years of his life, he lived in New York City where he was the chairman of the Boer Relief Fund, and vice president of the Netherlands Chamber of Commerce. John died in New York City of pneumonia at age 46. He is buried in Albany Rural Cemetery.

He married Cornelia Van Rensselaer Erving (1865-1931) in 1895. They had three children, all males. The first, John V.S.L. Pruyn III, died before his first birthday. The second son, Erving Pruyn, born in 1897, married Carolyn Prentice in 1926. The youngest, Hendrik Pruyn (1900-1969), later changed his name to Van Rensselaer Pruyn.

### **Scope and Content Note:**

This collection includes personal journals, European journals detailing Pruyn's travels abroad, a journal and letter book he kept while serving as Chancellor of the University of the State of New York, private financial ledgers, and business financial records. There are four diaries dated 1853,

1855, 1856 and 1857 of which the author does not appear to have been John V.S.L. Pruyn or his wife Harriet.

The bulk of this collection runs continuously from 1850 to 1877 and is found primarily in Pruyn's personal journals overlapped by the European journals. They include accounts of some of Pruyn's business activities, political activities, and major current events. However, for the most part, these personal journals describe Pruyn's social activities, including dinner parties with Horatio Seymour, Hamilton Fisk, William L. Marcy, Erastus Corning, Stephen Van Rensselaer, and L.B. Woolworth. The journals also mention Pruyn's business trips within the United States but include little detail of the business he conducted. A typical journal entry mentioned the weather, names of the people he visited, with whom he dined, and, on Sundays, the topic of the sermon preached that morning.

The Washington journal (1863-1865) stands out from the other personal journals, detailing activities in the Thirty-eighth Congress. Also, journal six (1867-1869) discusses at length President Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial; Pruyn opposed Johnson's impeachment.

The European journals detail tourist attractions that Pruyn visited. They all begin with his landing at Liverpool, England, and extend as far away as Russia, Egypt, and Jerusalem. A few of these trips included business, but Pruyn does not detail this very often. His 1856-1857 trip, the main purpose of which was to open offers in London for stock of both the New York Central and Michigan railroads, has a corresponding letter book. From London Pruyn corresponded with Erastus Corning, L.B. Woolworth, G.L. Wilson, Peabody Company, and others. On his last trip to Europe, in 1875, Pruyn was a delegate for the United States to a meeting of the Association for the Reform and Codification of the Law of the Nations.

The collection also includes a journal of Pruyn's activities as Chancellor of the University of the State of New York which contains detailed daily entries from 1862 to 1865 with less detail from 1866 to his death. This journal has official statements from the Office of the Regents as well. Pruyn kept a letterbook relating to his position as Chancellor from 1862 to 1874.

Within Pruyn's personal financial records, numerous entries documenting his real estate and stock holdings indicate he was a man of considerable wealth. A family expense book (1848-1876) shows expenses from about \$10,000 to \$40,000 per year; higher when Pruyn traveled abroad or renovated his residence. Other examples of expenses were for servants and charity. It is possible that Pruyn became a millionaire in his lifetime having built his fortune through his own endeavors and not by inheritance.

Pruyn's official cash book, liabilities, and legal accounts book all pertain to his various business activities. The Library of the Literature of the Law accounts book (1855-1877) lists revenues and expenses for the library that Pruyn established to collect books of law, famous trials, and prestigious lawyers. The Executrix Account Book (1887-1889) contains Pruyn's last will and testament, inventories of assets at the time of his death, and other legal papers. There are many loose papers from ledger three and the Tax and Repair Fund Book that have been separated into folders.

**Provenance Note:**

These papers are comprised of two separate accessions that were collated as one group in June 1991. The first group, accessioned as SC10762 in August 1938, was received by donation from William Gorham Rice. This group consisted chiefly of the ledger and other financial records now housed in boxes 10-13. The second group, accessioned as SC11061 in February 1943, was also received by donation from William Gorham Rice. This group included the diaries and letter books found in boxes 1-7.

**Container List:**

<b>Box</b>	<b>Contents</b>
1	Two speeches, 1824, 1825
	<b>Private Journals</b>
1	Journal #1. June 22-December 31, 1830; December 31, 1831; January 13-September 24, 1832
1	Journal #2. September 17, 1851-December 31, 1858; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 2)
1	Journal #3. January 1, 1859-April 6, 1862; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 2)
2	Journal #4. April 7, 1862-July 11, 1865; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 2 and 4)
2	Washington Journal, December 1863-March 9, 1865; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 2 and 4)
2	Journal #5. July 11, 1865-August 13, 1867; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 3 and 4)
3	Journal #6. August 14, 1867-June 11, 1869; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 3)
3	Journal #7. June 11, 1869-May 25, 1871; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 3)
3	Journal #8. May 26-September 13, 1871; June 16, 1872-June 12, 1874; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 3)
4	Journal #9. June 15, 1874-August 31, 1876; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 3)
4	Journal #10. September 1, 1876-November 20, 1877; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 3)
5	Personal Memorandum Book [Journal] as Chancellor, 1862-1877; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
5	Letter book as Chancellor, 1862-1874; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
	<b>European Journals</b>
6	Journal #1. June 16-December 7, 1846
6	Journal #2. December 4, 1850-September 17, 1851
6	Journal #3. October 7, 1856-July 9, 1857
6	European Letterbook, 1856-1857
6	Seven letters from Europe, 1856-1857

<b>Box</b>	<b>Contents</b>
6	Journal #4. June 5-October 13, 1860
6	Journal #5. September 18, 1865-January 27, 1866; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
6	Journal #6. September 12, 1871-June 16, 1872; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
6	Journal #7. August 10-November 3, 1875; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
7	Four diaries; 1853, 1855, 1856, 1857
	<b>Financial Records</b>
8	Private Ledger #1, 1839-1853
8	Private Ledger #2, 1853-1868; selected pages available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
9	Private Ledger #3, 1868-1883; selected pages available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
9	Private Ledger #4, 1885-1887
9	Papers of Ledger #3, 1870
10	Private Ledger #5, 1887-1928; kept by Anna Parker Pruyn
10	Tax & Repair Fund Book, 1887-1906 (Pruyn estate)
10	Papers from Tax & Repair Fund Book
11	Executrix Account Book, 1877-1889 (Pruyn estate)
12	Official Cash Book, 1832-1861
12	Liabilities, 1833-1877; selected pages available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
12	Legal Ledger Accounts, 1836-1868
13	Family and Private Expenses, Account book, 1848-1876; selected pages available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)
13	Library of the Literature of the Law Account Book, 1855-1877; also available on microfilm (MB/FM,370.92,P972,204-8382 Reel 1)

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