

Collecting old passports

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Old passports are some of the most fascinating documents from the past — indeed, they are artworks in their own right. This piece offers a brief history and explanation of their sometimes overlooked artistry.

A brief history

The passport system began during the French Revolution. During this period a citizen needed a passport to leave France, rather than to enter a foreign country. Passports and identification papers were intended both to secure the free movement of the citizens, and limit the movements of those perceived as enemies of the Revolution.

Passports came in different formats and sizes, usually a large leaf paper folded several times to fit into a wallet. It was either completely handwritten or contained printed forms with handwritten entries. At the end of the French Revolution¹, passports required several approval signatures. We can find examples showing five or six different signatures from members of the National Assembly. A wax seal was added to authenticate and secure the document.

The single sheet passport remained the common form in most countries till the end of the nineteenth century, and occasionally up until the 1920s.

One of the first passport booklets was issued by the Kingdom of Hannover (Germany) in 1863; it contained sixteen pages, coloured thread binding, with embossed elements and a watermark. One full page was dedicated to the bearers physical description — covering sixteen features in total, including details of the mouth, chin, nose, eyes, teeth, hair colouring and so on.

British passports, by contrast, did not include a physical description of the bearer until the introduction of a booklet in 1915. They merely stated the reason for travel, such as 'Mr Parker, his wife and a maid travelling to the continent'. It was thought that the British government did not wish to describe its citizens in a 'humiliating' way.

By 1915, most nations had introduced a passport booklet, and in the same year a passport photo was included. Initially any photo was permissible as long it fitted on a single page. Collectors can find the most curious passport photos — a man on a horse, a hunter with his gun, or a girl with a guitar. Such photos are, of course, no longer permitted — we are not even allowed to smile anymore.

The League of Nations held two passport conferences to standardise travel documents in 1920 and 1926. It would take more decades before passports were truly standardised, by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) around 1980.

The first electronic passport was issued in Malaysia in 1998; at the time of writing 140 of 196 countries are using ePassports.

The artistry of passports

A century ago, passports were issued manually. Personal data was handwritten. Stamps, seals, revenue stamps, and later, a passport photo were added. No document looked the same.

We should note that, for the most part, passports were issued by police stations, although the UK and the US had centralised passport offices.

An old travel document gives us a glimpse of the journey of its holder made. Visas and border stamps were obtained from countries or territories that may no longer exist. Collectors will learn about geography, diplomacy and travelling in general.

Two hundred years ago, travelling was usually only for the wealthy or for businesses. It was time-consuming; in 1800 it might take a whole day to leave the city of New York, two weeks to reach Georgia or Ohio and five

weeks to get to Illinois and Louisiana². By 1830, New York City to Georgia or Ohio might take one week, two to the state borders of Louisiana, Arkansas and Illinois, and five to Minnesota. Today, we travel with our electronic passport is fast and relatively inexpensive. The longest flight (Singapore-New York) with a distance of 9476 miles takes about 18.5 hours³.

As such, collecting old passports will preserve unique and beautiful documents from a time when travelling was less common. 📄

¹ Torpey, J. (1999). Acknowledgments. In *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge Studies in Law and Society, pp. Ix-Xii). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

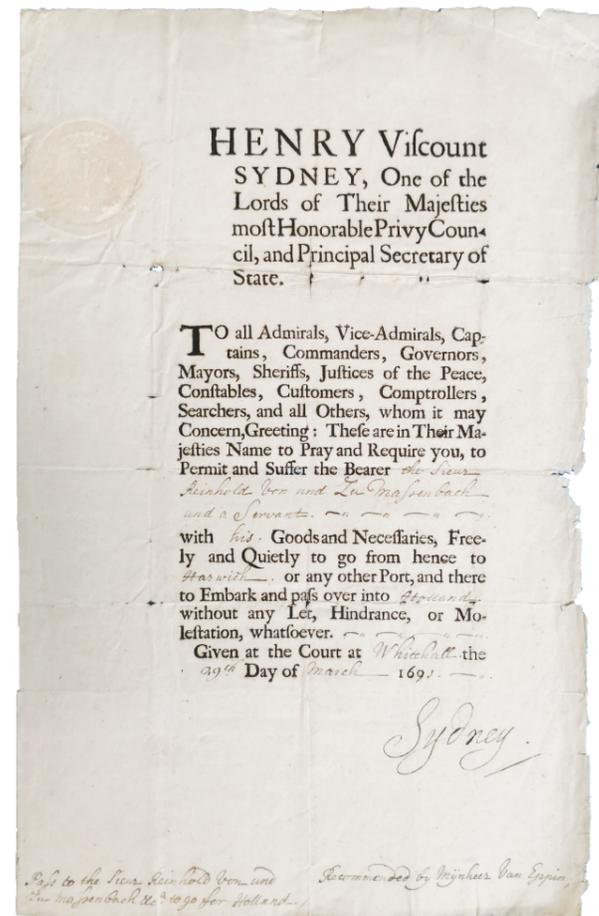
² www.mnn.com/green-tech/transportation/stories/how-fast-could-you-travel-across-the-us-in-the-1800s

³ www.simpleflying.com/worlds-longest-flights

1 Viscount Sidney passport, 1692. Courtesy of Brian Turner 22cm x 34cm

Henry Sidney, Earl of Romney, also (from 1689) Viscount Sidney of Sheppey, Baron Milton, (b.1641, Paris — d.1704, London) Having such a fantastic passport in a collection is an outstanding

achievement. Not only are British passports from the 17th century very rare to find, but this collectible was also issued in the name of a significant figure for England and the Revolution of 1688.



2 The passport of Captain Francis Garratt, 1875. From the author's archive 28cm x 36cm



Francis Garratt was born on 19 November 1814; son of John Garratt, goldsmith and Lord Mayor of London in 1824. As shown by his military records, Francis was serving in the 3rd Prince of Wales's Regiment of Dragoon Guards. He was Cornet in 1832, Lieutenant

in 1835 and Captain in 1842. Despite being 144 years old, the document looks as if it was made yesterday. There is not a single flaw in the custom-made shiny brown leather case. The thin paper is strengthened by a linen layer, adding to its durability.



3 Hunter with gun and dog, Passport of the German Empire, 1917. From the author's archive 18cm x 14cm open flat. Such passport photos are real treasures.



4 BELOW German passport with USA visa, 1935. Open flat 22 x 16 cm. From the author's archive 22cm x 16cm open flat. This nun may have been escaping Nazi Germany.