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## History Detective

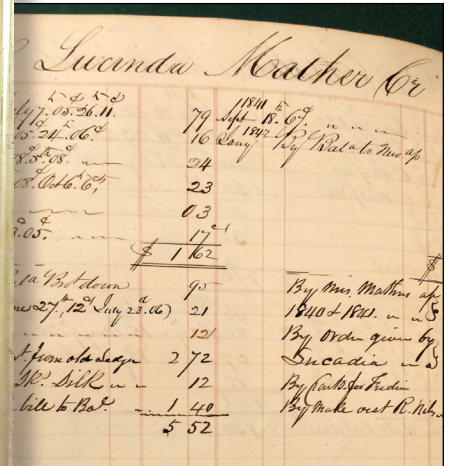
*by Michelle Tom, Librarian/Archivist*

Windsor Historical Society collections are made up of objects of all kinds, from postcards and scrapbooks to dresses and farm implements and more. We receive them via individuals and organizations making generous donations, or through purchasing items of particular uniqueness and historical value. When these materials come in, our primary jobs as archivists and curators are to determine the importance of the objects, and figure out if and how they fit into the history of our town. While that is simple enough to say, the process can be painstaking, alternating between fulfilling and frustrating, but always fascinating.

For example, a few months ago a rare book dealer alerted us to the availability of an account book purported to have belonged to John M. Niles and his brother Richard. John Milton Niles is a quite well-known Windsor native who founded the *Hartford Times* newspaper, became a U.S. senator in 1835, and served as Postmaster General in President Martin Van Buren's cabinet. On the face of it, anything belonging to this man would be of great value to the Society and to the town. Account books by their nature usually provide a rich look into what people did on a day-to-day basis, the kind of information that doesn't always make it into a biography or a genealogy. An entry showing that someone's rent



*John Milton Niles portrait by Philip Hewins  
Wadsworth Athenaeum Collections, 1962.260,  
Photo by Sue Tait Porcaro*



*Page from Niles Ledger  
Windsor Historical Society Collections,  
2015.59.1  
Photo by Michelle Tom*

has been paid in the form of three cords of wood can give us an idea as to what both the tenant's and landlord's lives were like.

However, this particular account book had few clues as to the part it played in the Niles brothers' lives, due to it mainly showing monetary figures and dates rather than spelling out what each transaction was comprised of. So, in order to determine whether this would be a worthwhile purchase for the Society, I had to figure out what the account book was for, and to whom it belonged. Exactly the kind of detective mystery archivists love to delve into.

The dealer's original ad for the book says it's "probably largely that of Richard," and that account information spans the years 1841-1843 and includes many names from the Poquonock area. Using that as a starting point, I first sought to learn more about who Richard Niles was, how long he and his family lived in Windsor, and, most importantly for the purposes of the account book purchase, what kind of business he was in. It didn't take long to discover that not only did Richard have a famous brother, but he also had a famous granddaughter in Christine Ladd Franklin, who was a noted 19th- and early 20th-century mathematician, logician, and

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