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Guide to the Reuben T. Durrett Collection of George Nicholas Papers 1788-1890



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier	ICU.SPCL.NICHOLASG
Title	Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. George Nicholas Papers
Date	1788-1890
Size	0.5 linear feet (1 box)
Repository	Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center University of Chicago Library 1100 East 57th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract Reuben Thomas Durrett (1824-1913), lawyer, manuscript and book collector, and Kentucky historian. George Nicholas (circa 1754-1799) was a Virginia politician and Kentucky pioneer, member of the Kentucky Constitutional Convention (1792), and Kentucky's first attorney general. The Reuben T. Durrett Collection of the George Nicholas Papers contains a brief biography of Nicholas, a small selection of correspondence, drafts of political speeches, and notes of his opinions on various political issues, some of which may have been in reference to the 1792 Kentucky Constitutional Convention. It includes two autograph letters signed by James Madison (1788).

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. George Nicholas Papers, [Box #, Folder #], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Acquisition Information

The existence of the Durrett library first came to the attention of the University of Chicago through William E. Dodd, a professor of American history at the University who had consulted the library as a student. Like other faculty members of the Division of the Social Sciences early in the century, Dodd was concerned about the University's lack of extensive research materials for history and related subjects, and since he was aware of Durrett's advanced age, he persuaded A. C. McLaughlin, also of the history department, to accompany him to Louisville in June, 1910, to see the collection and to make discreet inquiries about plans for its disposition. The two found Durrett himself uncertain about his plans, but learned that the Durrett family opposed making a

donation of the collection, and that they were in communication with Princeton University and the University of Illinois about selling the library.

Dodd himself was very enthusiastic about the research potential which Durrett's library represented, and won the support of many of his colleagues on the social science faculties in his efforts to persuade President Judson to consider the purchase by the University of the entire library, numbering some 30,000 volumes. Convinced that the collection would be a valuable addition to the University's holdings, but wary of the expense involved, Judson agreed cautiously to investigate the idea. Although Dodd and his colleagues were anxious to conclude the agreement quickly, fearing competition from other would-be purchasers or the dispersal of the collection upon Durrett's apparently imminent death, the task of deciding upon a fair offer was made difficult by the fact that the collection had never been adequately catalogued.

Durrett's own suggestion made in December, 1912 of \$45,000 seemed high, so in February 1913, the University engaged Walter Lichtenstein, a Northwestern University librarian who had previously acted as purchasing agent for the University of Chicago libraries, to assess the value of the Durrett collection. Lichtenstein's report was submitted to President Judson on February 21, 1913, following a trip to Louisville to sample the collection.

The assessment, made on terms of commercial market value rather than scholarly significance, divided Durrett's library into four parts. Some 20,000 bound volumes (including 500 volumes of Kentuckiana) he estimated at \$7,200. Two hundred fifty file folders of pamphlet material had no apparent commercial value. Numerous manuscripts and newspapers were difficult to assess but Lichtenstein thought they could be fairly purchased for \$15,000. A collection of maps was estimated to have a value around \$50. Lichtenstein's estimate, therefore, totaled \$22,000-\$22,500, considerably less than Durrett's own. When the University authorized Lichtenstein to make this offer to the Durrett family, however, they accepted it, apparently favoring Chicago as the repository of their collection. The purchase sum, which was too high to be taken from the University's ordinary budget, was raised among outside donors, and under Lichtenstein's supervision, the library was dismantled and shipped to Chicago by early May. It filled 287 large packing crates. Its arrival provoked considerable comment in the Louisville and Chicago press, and almost immediately the University began to receive research inquiries from scholars and requests from several libraries for copies of some of the Durrett material to add to their own collections.

In his report Lichtenstein had warned President Judson that considerable effort and expense would be required to process the collection once it was at the University. His warning proved to be justified. Aside from the massive undertaking of unpacking, sorting, and cataloguing the collection, much of the material was found to be in poor condition, requiring cleaning, repair, and binding or rebinding. To facilitate the efficient processing of the Durrett acquisition, the entire operation was assigned to Edward A. Henry of the library staff, who, with the help of his assistants, was to devote most of his attention to the Durrett project for some seven years. It was decided that duplicates should be disposed of, that a number of Filson Club possessions in Durrett's library should be returned to the Club, and that most of the non-manuscript material in the collection would be distributed according to subject matter among the University's various departmental libraries. On several occasions between 1913 and 1937, items of an official

character were returned to Kentucky upon request, including records of Jefferson County, journals of Kentucky constitutional conventions, and certain manuscripts and photographs of the Filson Club identified by the club's president, R. C. Ballard Thurston. Most of Henry's time seems to have been devoted to preparing the material for this dispersal. His assignment was expanded in 1914 when the University purchased a collection totaling 436 volumes of Kentucky newspapers and miscellaneous books from Mrs. Joel R. Lyle, sister of Robert C. Boggs of Lexington, Kentucky. It was deemed appropriate to merge the Boggs-Lyle acquisition with the Durrett, and the two were processed together.

By the end of the 1915-16 academic year, about 9,000 of the Durrett and Boggs-Lyle volumes had been processed and distributed to the departmental libraries. It was then that Henry and his staff turned some of their attention to the manuscripts--that is, to the material comprising the Durrett Collection as described in this guide. At that time the Durrett manuscripts were apparently divided into four large groups--the Joel Tanner Hart Papers, the Joshua Lacy Wilson Papers, miscellaneous manuscripts, and miscellaneous separately bound items--either mounted in scrapbooks or bound together. A card catalog was compiled for at least the first three of these groups.

The Durrett Collection remained in this state until the mid-1950s. By then it had been incorporated within the holdings of the Department of Special Collections (1951), and it became clear that reorganization of the manuscripts was necessary. Paul Angle, a member of the staff of the Chicago Historical Society, who had surveyed the University of Chicago's manuscript collection as a consultant in 1944, had pointed out that the Durrett miscellaneous bound manuscripts in particular were of little use to scholars as they were then arranged and described. Moreover, the Special Collections staff had observed that the mountings and bindings done by Henry's staff were detrimental to the lives of the manuscripts, and that the existing catalog and descriptions provided inadequate access to the documents. The manuscripts, therefore, were removed from their bindings and divided into smaller and more coherent sub-collections.

In the 1970s, an effort was undertaken to edit the 1956 guide, to enhance the descriptions of the Durrett codices for greater detail and accuracy, and to differentiate between transcripts and original manuscript material bound together in the codices. Manuscript material also received conservation treatment. In 1983, another attempt was made to write a comprehensive guide to the entire collection. This guide remained in use until 2015. The current guide was completed in 2016.

Biographical Note

George Nicholas was prominent in the political affairs of both Virginia and Kentucky and displayed an active interest in several federal political issues. He was born in 1754 near Williamsburg, Virginia, to a prominent family of the Old Dominion colony and was educated at the College of William and Mary. He served as a colonel in the Revolutionary War, though he did not participate in any major engagements.

Nicholas left Williamsburg in 1780, following the death of his father, and resettled to Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1781 he entered the Virginia legislature, where he became a close friend of both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, actively supporting the latter's bill for religious freedom in 1784. As a member of the Virginia ratifying convention in 1788, Nicholas strongly favored the adoption of the Federal Constitution.

In 1790 Nicholas moved to Danville, Kentucky, where he became involved in land speculation ventures as well as continuing his interest in politics. He was a member of the Kentucky Constitutional Convention in April 1792 and, as one of Kentucky's leading legal minds, Colonel Nicholas was called upon to serve as chief draftsman for the constitutional document. For this, Nicholas is known as the "Father of the Kentucky Constitution." When Kentucky was granted statehood, he became the state's first Attorney General, though he retired from the position after six months.

The many creditable aspects of Nicholas' political record are offset to some extent by other activities of a rather questionable character, with historians questioning his involvement with James Wilkinson in the Spanish Controversy and the personal gains he made in his dealings with land speculators in his official capacity. The final years of his life were spent practicing law in Lexington, Kentucky. In 1799, when Transylvania University established the first law school in the west, Colonel Nicholas was appointed as its first law professor. He died in Lexington on July 25, 1799 and is buried in the Old Episcopal Burial Ground on Lexington's Third Street. Named after him are both the city of Nicholasville, Kentucky and Nicholas County.

Scope Note

The collection is split into three subseries.

Series I, Personal, contains a biographical sketch of Nicholas, written after his death.

Series II, Correspondence, contains a small collection of outgoing and incoming correspondence. This subseries includes correspondence with both James Madison and Governor Isaac Shelby. Materials are arranged chronologically.

Series III, Writings, contains drafts of political speeches, notes on political issues, and treatises. The records of discussions are undated, but seem to relate to the political discussions preceding and surrounding the 1792 Kentucky Constitutional Convention. Materials are arranged by type (Notes, Discussions, Speeches, and Treatises).

Related Resources

Browse finding aids by topic.

Subject Headings

- Durrett, Reuben T. (Reuben Thomas), 1824-1913
- Nicholas, George, 1754-1799
- Madison, James, 1751-1836
- Attorneys general -- Kentucky
- Kentucky -- History -- 1792-1865
- Kentucky -- Politics and government -- 1792-1865
- Kentucky. Constitutional Convention (1792)
- Kentucky. Constitution (1792)

INVENTORY

Series I: Personal

Box 1

Folder 1

Biographical sketch of George Nicholas – undated – A.D. 14 p.

Series II: Correspondence

Box 1

Folder 2

Nicholas, George, Charlottesville, Kentucky, to General Wilkinson - January 23, 1788 – A.L.S. 5 p.

Box 1

Folder 3

Nicholas, George, Charlottesville, Kentucky, to [unknown] – February 16, 1788 – A.L.S. 6 p.

Box 1

Folder 4

Great-grandson of George Nicholas, Owingsville, Kentucky, to R.T. Durrett – September 17, 1890 – A.L. 1 p.

Box 1

Folder 5

Madison, James, Orange, Virginia, to George Nicholas, Maryland – April 8, 1788 – A.L.S. 6 p.

- Opposition to the Constitution in various states; Kentucky and the Mississippi; separation of Kentucky from Virginia.

Box 1

Folder 6

Madison, James, Orange, Virginia, to George Nicholas, Maryland – May 17, 1788 – A.L.S. 10 p.

- Kentucky and the Mississippi; comparison of Continental Congress and that under the new Constitution.

Box 1

Folder 7

Nicholas, George to Governor Isaac Shelby – 1795 – A.L.S. 3 p.

- Accepts contract for whiskey; Thompson says Indians steal horses; Does not hear from Slate; Wayne's treaty with Indians will not give security to Slate.

Box 1

Folder 8

Letter fragments – undated – 2 p.

Series III: Writings

Box 1

Folder 9

Notes – On a speech in favor of the Constitution – [circa 1792] – A.D. 8 p.

Box 1

Folder 10

Notes - Resolutions regarding the form of government for Kentucky – [circa 1792] – A.D. 5 p.

Box 1

Folder 11

Notes (Fragments) – Alien and Sedition Laws – 1798 – A.D. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 12

Notes (Fragments) – General – undated – A.D. 7 p.

Box 1

Folder 13

Discussion – “Government” – undated – A.D. 9 p.

Box 1

Folder 14

Discussion – “Government for a Limited Time” – undated – A.D. 8 p.

Box 1

Folder 15

Discussion – Expenses, land taxes, loan office and Jefferson – undated – A.D. 10 p.

Box 1

Folder 16

Discussion – “Checks and Division of Powers” – undated – A.D. 6 p.

Box 1

Folder 17

Discussion – “Senate” – undated – A.D. 18 p.

Box 1

Folder 18

Discussion – “House of Representatives” – undated – A.D. 7 p.

Box 1

Folder 19

Discussion – “The office of Governor” – undated – A.D. 18 p.

Box 1

Folder 20

Discussion – “Appointments to Office” – undated – A.D. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 21

Discussion – “Right to Suffrage” – undated – A.D.10 p.

Box 1

Folder 22

Discussion – “Bill of Rights” – undated – A.D. 3 p.

Box 1

Folder 23

Discussion – “Courts” – undated – A.D. 32 p.

Box 1

Folder 24

Discussion – “Slaves” – undated – A.D. 11 p.

Box 1

Folder 25

Speech – Speech in Kentucky Convention – [circa 1792] – A.D. 8 p.

Box 1

Folder 26

Speech – “To the Citizens of Kentucky” – undated – A.D. 3 p.

Box 1

Folder 27

Speech – In favour of the Senate – 1792 – A.D. 24 p.

Box 1

Folder 28

Speech – In favour of the House of Representative – 1792 – A.D. 3 p.

Box 1

Folder 29

Speech – Attack upon Congress – circa 1798 – A.D. 8 p.

- For voting President Adams the power to raise armies

Box 1

Folder 30

Treatise - Naval war with France – circa 1798 – A.D. 24 p.

Box 1

Folder 31

Treatises - “Senate”, “Governor”, “Limitations of government”, “Slaves”, and “Courts” – undated – A.D. 83 p.

- Likely written by James Madison