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# Guide to the James E. O'Hara Papers 1866-1970



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## **Descriptive Summary**

<b>Identifier</b>	ICU.SPCL.OHARA
<b>Title</b>	O'Hara, James E. Papers
<b>Date</b>	1866-1970
<b>Size</b>	3 linear feet (2 boxes)
<b>Repository</b>	Special Collections Research Center University of Chicago Library 1100 East 57th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.
<b>Abstract</b>	James E. O'Hara (1844-1905), Lawyer and Republican Congressman, 1883-1887. Contains letters from family and constituents, photographs, a biographical sketch (1970) written by O'Hara's granddaughter, Vera Jean O'Hara Rivers, and memorabilia.

## **Information on Use**

### **Access**

The collection is open for research.

### **Digital Images**

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The University of Chicago Library appreciates hearing from anyone who may have information about any of the images in this collection.

## Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: O'Hara, James E. Papers, [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

## Biographical Note

James Edward O'Hara (February 26, 1844-September 15, 1905) was born in New York City, the illegitimate son of a West Indian woman and an Irish merchant named O'Hara. Little is known of his youth, much of which he apparently spent in the Danish West Indies. It is not clear when he returned to New York, but in 1862 he visited Union-occupied eastern North Carolina in the company of New York missionaries, and decided to stay permanently.

He taught in a school for freedmen, first in New Bern, then in Goldsboro. His political experience began with work as engrossing clerk to the constitutional convention of 1868 and to the legislature of 1868-69. About this time he moved to Halifax County, a cotton-growing area with a heavy African American population. In 1871 O'Hara spent about two years in Washington D.C. working as a \$1200-a-year clerk in the Treasury Department, and also studying law at Howard University. In 1873 he was licensed to practice law in North Carolina.

The next year he unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination for Congress in the second congressional district, but another African American, John A. Hyman, was chosen. O'Hara served four years (1874-1878) as chairman of the Halifax county board of commissioners and in 1875 he won a seat in the state constitutional convention. O'Hara was one of the Republican candidates for presidential elector in 1876, but he withdrew just before the election because of Republican fears that racial prejudice might reduce the party vote.

Two years later O'Hara won the congressional nomination, but was defeated in a three-way race by Republican internal division and fraudulent vote counting by election officials. His attempts to overturn the victory of Democrat William H. Kitchin in the state courts and in an election contest before the House of Representatives were fruitless.

From 1878 to 1882 he practiced law in the courts of eastern North Carolina and held no public office. His campaign for the congressional nomination in 1880 was a failure. He took an active role in the 1881 state prohibition election, gaining wide public exposure in a bipartisan "wet" coalition.

He was elected to Congress in 1882 after a bitter dispute with incumbent Republican Orlando Hubbs. Both men claimed to be the regular nominee, but Hubbs withdrew before Election Day and O'Hara won virtually without opposition.

O'Hara was re-nominated in 1884 and easily turned back a Democratic challenge from Frederick A. Woodard. By now an important state party leader, he was a delegate-at-large from North Carolina to the Republican national convention of 1884. Republican factionalism frustrated his attempt for a third term in 1886, when a rival African American candidate, Istael B. Abbott, so divided the party vote that Furnifold M. Simmons, Democrat, won the election.

During his tenure in Congress (1883-1887) O'Hara was recognized as a good representative of his district. He showed great concern about issues involving African Americans and their civil rights, perhaps because he was for a brief period the only African American Representative, and since at no time during his two terms were there more than one other African American Congressman. He gained brief national attention in December 1884 for an amendment he offered to the interstate commerce bill forbidding discrimination in interstate passenger travel by rail. In his second term, O'Hara was an active member of the committee on invalid pensions.

For a short time after his retirement from Congress, O'Hara published a newspaper called the *Enfield Progress*. (Only one issue has been preserved.) About 1890 he moved to New Bern, N. C., where he resumed the practice of law. In 1894 his son, Raphael, joined his father in the New Bern law practice. Although he did not again seek elective office, he retained an interest in Republican party affairs.

O'Hara was married twice, first to Ann Maria Harris on March 16, 1864, later to Elizabeth Eleanor Harris, July 14, 1869. He was a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

The University of Chicago Library received the James E. O'Hara Papers early in 1975, through the offices of Professor John Hope Franklin (John Mathews Manly Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of History), and Eric Anderson, a graduate student working with Professor Franklin. Professor Franklin had become aware of Representative O'Hara's papers over two decades earlier while doing research on Representative John Roy Lynch (Republican from Mississippi, served from 1873 to 1883). Apparently the bulk of the material from Representative O'Hara's Congressional and law offices has either been lost or discarded since that time. Vera Jean O'Hara Rivers, granddaughter of Representative O'Hara, gave what remained the collection to the University.

### **Scope Note**

The James E. O'Hara Papers consist of miscellaneous materials that document the life and career of one of America's first African American Congressmen. There are several letters from family and from constituents in North Carolina. In addition, three folders are devoted to photographs of Representative O'Hara, his wife and son, and associates. An important and detailed resource for the study of the O'Hara family and the social history of the late nineteenth century South is the biographical sketch of Representative O'Hara and his family written by his granddaughter, Vera Jean O'Hara Rivers, and entitled "A Thespian Must Play His Role." Finally, the collection includes some ephemeral material, such as a handbill announcing the establishment of a Canadian newspaper for fugitive slaves, an autograph book and "Register of Documents sent" owned by James E. O'Hara, and a small twentieth century booklet of biographical sketches that includes a brief description of Representative O'Hara.

### **Related Resources**

The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/select.html>

## Subject Headings

- O'Hara, James E. (James Edward), 1844-1905
- Legislators -- United States
- African American legislators
- Photographs

## INVENTORY

### Box 1

#### Folder 1

Vera Jean O'Hara Rivers, "A Thespian must play his role" A Biographical sketch of Hon. James E. O'Hara: his life, work and family, Statesville, North Carolina, December 1970. Typed Ms, 84 p. plus Addenda consisting of xerox copies of various documents documenting the career of North Carolina Congressman O'Hara, and three handwritten genealogical charts, paginated 85-103.

### Box 1

#### Folder 2

Letters, A. Robbins, Windsor, N.C., to J. E. O'Hara

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-002>

- A. Robbins, Windsor, N.C., to J. E. O'Hara, September 27, 1885. Request about bounty for a soldier.
- A. Robbins, Windsor, N.C., to J. E. O'Hara, September 27, 1885. Request about soldier's bounty for his son.

### Box 1

#### Folder 3

J. E. O'Hara, New Berne, N.C., to Raphael O'Hara, 1894 (?). Birthday letter signed "Mama and Papa." A.L.S., 1 p.

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-003>

### Box 1

#### Folder 4

"Prospectus. Voice of the Fugitives, (In Canada) Is to be the title of a Newspaper to be published by Mr. Henry Bibb, at Sandwich, Canada West" Printed prospectus and subscription form, 1 p.

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-004>

### Box 1

#### Folder 5

Miscellaneous

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-005>

- [J. E. O'Hara], no date or place, notes for speeches. A. D., 4 p.
- Raphael O'Hara, Washington, D.C., to J. E. O'Hara, April 21, 1885.
- A.L.S., 2 p. Personal news.

### Box 1

#### Folder 6

Photo 1. O'Hara family portrait (James E., Elizabeth Eleanor Harris, and Raphael O'Hara), ca. 1883.

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-006>

**Box 1****Folder 7**

Photos 2-6

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-007>

- 2. O'Hara family homestead in New Bern, North Carolina, n.d.
- 3. James E. O'Hara, 1883 (?).
- 4-5. James E. O'Hara, two photographs ca. 1900-1905.
- 6. James E. O'Hara and the New Bern Bar Association, of New Bern, North Carolina, 1905.

**Box 1****Folder 8**

Photos 7-8

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-008>

- 7. Elizabeth Eleanor Harris O'Hara, ca. 1869.
- 8. Elizabeth Eleanor Harris O'Hara, ca. 1910.

**Box 1****Folder 9**

Photos 9-10

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-009>

- 9. George Henry White (1852-1918), ca. 1897 (cf. published photograph, "In the Public Eye," *Munsey's Magazine*, 1897, p. 15).
- 10. John R. Lynch (1847-1939), Natchez, Mississippi, June 22, 1866 (photographic self portrait).

**Box 1****Folder 10**

Arthur J. Smith, *The Negro in the political classics of the American government*. Washington, D.C., 1937. Printed, privately circulated biographical dictionary consisting of biographies printed on cards and bound by Raphael O'Hara (?) into a small scrapbook. View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-010>

**Box 1****Folder 11**

James E. O'Hara's autograph book, begun April 26, 1884.

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-011>

**Box 1****Folder 12**

Miscellaneous

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-012>

- James E. O'Hara, Register of Documents sent, January, 1884-May 1886.
- "Newspaper exchanges to Progress" (pp. 32-34;
- Congressional list for the Progress" (pp. 48-53) and a record of advertisements, July 1887 (p. 87). Remainder of book blank.
- "48th Congress, 2d Session. H. R. 7556. In the Senate of the United States. February 24, 1885 . . . An Act to regulate the manufacture and sale of spirituous and malt liquors in the District of Columbia." Printed document, 6 p., in Register of documents sent.

**Box 1****Folder 13**

Scrapbook I (newspaper clippings).

View digitized documents. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0001-013>

**Box 2**

Scrapbook II (newspaper clippings)

View digitized documents, part 1. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0002-001-01>

View digitized documents, part 2. <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/scrc/md/ohara-0002-001-02>