

University of Chicago Library

Guide to the Reuben T. Durrett Collection of James Wilkinson Papers 1784-1882



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Descriptive Summary

Identifier	ICU.SPCL.WILKINSONJ
Title	Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. James Wilkinson Papers
Date	1784-1882
Size	0.5 linear feet (1 box)
Repository	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. The collection contains the papers of James Wilkinson (1757-1825). Wilkinson was a soldier and politician in the War of Independence and War of 1812, and Governor of the Louisiana Territory (1805-1807). Over the course of his career he served as an agent of the Spanish monarchy and was court martialed in 1811 for his role in the Burr Conspiracy. The bulk of the collection is incoming and outgoing correspondence, with some receipts, financial agreements, and statements of sale. The collection spans the years 1784-1882, with the bulk of the material dated before 1823.

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. James Wilkinson Papers, [Box #, Folder #], 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

James Wilkinson was born in Maryland in 1757. His father, Joseph Wilkinson, had inherited Stoakley Manor, a small plantation in Calvert County. Following his death in 1764 much of the estate was sold to cover debts. James was educated by a private tutor and later studied medicine at the University of Philadelphia. He abandoned these studies in 1775 to serve in the Pennsylvania rifle battalion and was commissioned a captain in the Continental Army that same year.

He had a distinguished early military career, and by 1776 he was serving as an aide to General Horatio Gates. He was appointed Brigadier General in 1777, despite his youth. He served under General Washington in the battles of Trenton and Princeton, and held a position as secretary to the Board of War in 1778. The following year he was appointed clothier general for the Continental forces, but resigned after only a few months, due to accusations of irregularities in his accounts.

During the closing years of the Revolutionary War Wilkinson served two terms in the Pennsylvania Assembly, before selling his properties and moving to Kentucky in early 1784. It was at this point that he became involved in the affairs of Spain. He persuaded the Spanish authorities that there was a plot to occupy Spanish territories in Louisiana and Florida and, in return for a monopoly of Spanish trade routes on the Mississippi River, he took an oath of allegiance to the Spanish monarchy. This monopoly was revoked by 1791 and Wilkinson returned to military life as a Brigadier General in the American army. He continued to receive payments from Spain until at least 1796, for information on troop movements and plans.

In late 1804, James Wilkinson met Aaron Burr, then Vice President to Thomas Jefferson. At this point, Wilkinson was Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Army at New Orleans and Governor of the Louisiana Territory. Burr was charged, though acquitted, of treason in 1807, and Wilkinson was implicated in the conspiracy. While Wilkinson openly distanced himself from Burr and proclaimed allegiance to Jefferson, he was court-martialed in 1811, and only narrowly escaped indictment. Although he was acquitted, the rumors surrounding both the Burr Conspiracy and his Spanish connections were too great and he was forced to resign from his military offices.

His personal life was less controversial. He married his first wife, Ann Biddle, in 1778 and they had four sons. Following her death in 1807 he married Celestine Laveau Trudeau, the daughter of New Orleans' politician Charles Laveau Trudea, with whom he had a further three children, two girls and a boy, one of whom died in early childhood. Wilkinson spent his final years as U.S. Envoy to Mexico and passed away on December 28, 1825 in Mexico City.

Scope Note

The collection spans the years 1784-1882, with the bulk of the material dated before 1823. Materials are arranged chronologically.

Correspondents of note include John Marshall, Henry Knox, Juan Ventura Morales, and Henry Dearborn.

Topics covered by this collection include Wilkinson's personal debts and financial obligations, army affairs in Louisiana and interactions with the War Department, the activities of Aaron Burr and the Burr Conspiracy, and Wilkinson's resulting 1811 court martial.

The collection also contains a small number of receipts and financial agreements, and a bound volume of transcriptions of manuscript materials.

Related Resources

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

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

Researchers interested in topics represented in the Durrett Collection should check the author, title, or subject headings relevant to their interests in the Library catalog for potentially useful books and pamphlets from the Durrett Library, which were dispersed among the existing departmental libraries at the time of acquisition. Some of these items have since been transferred to the Rare Books collection and to the Reuben T. Durrett Collection of Broad­sides, Pamphlets, and Leaflets, in the Special Collections Research Center.

The Durrett rare book collections include works of literature, travel and description, early histories of Kentucky such as Mann Butler's, biographies, legislative acts, and other legal documents.

Examples include Henry McMurtrie's *Sketches of Louisville and Its Environs* (1819); a collection of humorous verses, *The Kentucky Miscellany*, by Thomas Johnson, Jr. (1821), one of two known copies of the fourth edition, the first known to survive; and *The Confession of Jereboam O. Beauchamp ...* (1826).

Among the newspapers are 135 titles published in Kentucky, beginning in 1788 with the *Kentucky Gazette*, the first newspaper established in the state. Other important titles include the *Mirror*, the *Palladium*, the *Guardian of Freedom*, the *Farmer's Library or Ohio Intelligencer*, and numerous campaign newspapers such as *The Patriot* and *The Spirit of '76* from 1826.

Included in the American Paper Currency Collection in the Special Collections Research Center is Durrett's collection of confederate currency, among which are many examples of notes issued by the Bank of Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Correspondence, reports, and clippings concerning the acquisition of the Reuben T. Durrett Collection for the University of Chicago are found in the University of Chicago Library Records Addenda.

In addition, the following collections contain material related in subject matter to various portions of the Durrett Collection:

Codex MS 798 Lettres de Mr. Cahusac, Américain, juge de paix à Fleurance, 1806-1836

Church History Documents Collection

Codex MS 790, Letters to Virgil David, 1828-1838

Douglas, Stephan A. Papers

English, William H. Papers

Ethno-History Collection

Lafayette Manuscripts

Lafayette-Bonaventure. Collection

Lane, Ebenezer, Family. Papers

Lewis, Fielding. Papers

Robertson, Wyndham. Papers

All Durrett sub-collections are as follows:

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Boggs Family. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Boone Family. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Broadsides, Broadshets, Pamphlets, and Leaflets

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Christopher Columbus Graham. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. George and William Croghan. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. George Nicholas. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. George Rogers Clark. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Government Records

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Edmund Lyne Estate. Records

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. James Wilkinson. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Joel Tanner Hart. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Joshua Lacey Wilson. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Lewis Family. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Louisville, Kentucky Board of Trustees. Records

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Mann Butler. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Michael Walsh Cluskey. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Miscellaneous Manuscripts and Codices

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Portraits, Illustrations, and Cartographic Material

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Reuben T. Durrett. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Richard H. Collins. Papers

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Richard Jouett Menefee Collection on Matthew Harris Jouett

Durrett, Reuben T. Collection. Shelby Family. Papers

Subject Headings

- Durrett, Reuben T. (Reuben Thomas), 1824-1913
- Wilkinson, James, 1757-1825
- United States. Army
- Burr Conspiracy, 1805-1807
- United States--History--Revolution, 1775-1783
- United States--History--Constitutional period, 1789-1809
- United States--History--War of 1812
- Generals--United States--19th century
- Kentucky--History--18th century

INVENTORY

Box 1

Folder 1

Wilkinson, James – Agreement – May 4, 1784 – A.D.S. 2 p.

Box 1

Folder 2

Marshall, John, Richmond, Virginia to [James Wilkinson, Kentucky] – Letter – January 1 1787 – A.L.S. 4 p.

- Concerning political troubles in the eastern states

Box 1

Folder 3

Wilkinson, James to A. Dunn – Note – March 21, 1789 – A.D.S. 2 p.

Box 1

Folder 4

Moore, Thomas M., James Wilkinson and Isaac B. Dunn – Articles of Agreement – April 11, 1789 - A.D.S 3 p.

Box 1

Folder 5

Biddle, Clement, Notary Public, Philadelphia- Notice of Protest – June 30, 1789 – D.S. 1 p. box 5 199

- Given by James Wilkinson to William Lewis

Box 1

Folder 6

Forde, Standish and James Wilkinson – Agreement – [November 1789] – A.D.S. 1 p.
• For payment of flour

Box 1

Folder 7

Wilkinson, James and Peyton Short, Lexington, [Virginia] to Isaac Shelby, Lincoln County, Kentucky – Letter and Proposition – December 19, 1789 – A.L.S. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 8

Wilkinson, James, Frankfort, Kentucky – Copy of Letter – January 20, 1790 – A.L.S. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 9

Lacassagne, Michael, Louisville, Kentucky to James Wilkinson, Frankfort, Kentucky – Letter – July 2, 1791 – A.L.S. 4 p.
• Demands payment of debt

Box 1

Folder 10

Lacassagne, Michael, Louisville, Kentucky to [General James Wilkinson, Frankfort, Kentucky] – Letter – December 16, 1791 – A.L.S. 3 p.

Box 1

Folder 11

Wilkinson, James, Fort Washington, Ohio to Henry Knox, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – Letter – June 21, 1792 – A.L.S. 2 p.
• Encloses dispatches from Major Hamtramck and deposition concerning Indian affairs

Box 1

Folder 12

Wilkinson, James to Michael Lacassagne – Indenture – A.D.S. 2 p. November 12, 1792

Box 1

Folder 13

Knox, H[enry] to Brigadier General [James] Wilkinson – Letter – May 17, 1793 – A.L.S. 2 p.
• Encloses opinion on Attorney-General of the United States regarding civil prosecution of Wilkinson

Box 1

Folder 14

Murray, Richard to James Wilkinson – Receipt – October 3, 1794 – A.D.S. 2 p.

Box 1

Folder 15

Dayton, Jona, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Brigadier General Wilkinson, Fort Washington, North West Territory – Letter – January 1, 1795 – A.L.S. 4 p.
• Thinks he can get permission from Congress to pay for land with Military Warrants.

Box 1

Folder 16

Power, Thomas, Cincinnati, Ohio to Brigadier General J[ames] Wilkinson - Letter – November 12, 1795 – A.L.S. 4 p.
• Apologizes for any offense; Gives opinion of Anthony Wayne

Box 1

Folder 17

Craig, Lewis to James Wilkinson – Receipt – April 16, 1796 – A.D.S. 2 p.

Box 1

Folder 18

Dayton, Jona to Brigadier General [James] Wilkinson – Letter – May 20, 1796 – A.L.S. 2 p.

- Concerning sales of Mad River lands

Box 1

Folder 19

Belli, John, Cincinnati, Ohio to General [James] Wilkinson – Letter – June 7, 1796 – A.L.S. 4 p.

- Information regarding Chas. Wilkins was confidential; reduction in size of army probable

Box 1

Folder 20

Henry, James M. to Brigadier General J[ames] Wilkinson – Letter – March 30, 1798 – A.L.S. 6 p.

- War Department involvement in new Mississippi territory

Box 1

Folder 21

Price, John to Weisiger, Lafon and Wilkinson – Land Survey – April 28, 1798 – A.D.S. 2 p.

Box 1

Folder 22

Adams, John, Frankfort to Brigadier General James Wilkinson – Letter – December 14, 1798 – A.L.S. 2 p.

Box 1

Folder 23

Hamilton, Alexander, New York to Brigadier General Wilkinson – Letter – February 12, 1799 – A.L.S. 4 p.

- Concerning movement of troops and military affairs

Box 1

Folder 24

Hooma, Alatala to General James Wilkinson – Receipt – August 31, 1803 – A.D.S. 1 p.

Box 1

Folder 25

Hamilton Alexander, New York to Brigadier General Wilkinson – Letter – October 31, 1799 – A.L.S. 6 p.

- Concerning pay in the army, requisitioning property and directions for court martial

Box 1

Folder 26

Gallatin, Albert, Washington, D.C. to C.C. Clairborne – Letter – October 31, 1803 - A.L.S. 3 p.

- Regarding Wilkinson and the taking of Louisiana

Box 1

Folder 27

Adair, John, Frankfort, Kentucky to General James Wilkinson – Letter – December 10, 1804 – A.L.S. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 28

W[ilkinson], J[ames], St. Louis, Missouri to H. Dearborn, Secretary of War – September 8, 1805 – A.L.S. 2 p.

- Prospect of reenforcements at New Orleans; plan for an invasion of Mexico

Box 1

Folder 29

Coburn, John, Mason County, Kentucky to James Wilkinson – Letter – October 15, 1805 – A.L.S. 2 p.

- Congratulates Wilkinson on position as Chief Magistrate of the Territory of Orleans.

Box 1

Folder 30

House of Representatives, Territory of Orleans, Louisiana – Resolution – January 27, 1807 – A.D.S. 2 p.

- Signed by John Watkins, Speaker of the House

Box 1

Folder 31

Morales, Juan Ventura, Pensacola, Florida to James Wilkinson – Letter – February 3, 1807 – A.L.S. 1 p.

- Noise of preparations are liable to interfere with Burr's plans.

Box 1

Folder 32

Smith, R[ober]t, Washington, [D.C.] to General James Wilkinson – Letter – June 22, 1807 – A.L.S. 3 p.

- Recalls conversation and letters concerning Burr's plans.

Box 1

Folder 33

Morrison, James, Lexington, Kentucky to General James Wilkinson – Letter – September 9, 1807 – A.L.S. 3 p.

- J.H Daviss prepares book attacking president; asks for president's black list

Box 1

Folder 34

Elliot, Daniel D, Natchez, Missouri to James Wilkinson – Letter – June 30, 1808 – A.L.S. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 35

Madison, James, Washington, D.C. to General Wilkinson – Letter – October 12, 1811 - A.L.S. 1 p.

- Wishes justice in Wilkinson's court martial

Box 1

Folder 36

Monroe, James, Loudoun, Virginia to [General James Wilkinson] – Letter – July 31, 1816 – A.L.S. 1 p.

Box 1

Folder 37

Austin, Stephen F., Saltillo, Mexico to James Wilkinson, City of Mexico – Letter – May 11, 1823 – A.L.S. 4 p.

Box 1

Folder 38

Bigot, Ludovic, Louisville, Kentucky – Statement of Sale – November 13, 1882 – A.D.S. 1 p.

- Sold a portrait and copper plate profile of Major General James Willkinson to Richard H. Collins

Box 1

Folder 39

Wilkinson, James – Papers – 1784-1882 – Codex Typescript transcript. 97 p.

- Cdx203; Transcriptions of manuscript documents of General James Wilkinson