

Guide to the James Watson Webb Papers

MS 683



compiled by William E. Brown, Jr.

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Manuscripts and Archives
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CALL NUMBER: MS 683

CREATOR: Webb, J. Watson (James Watson), 1802-1884

TITLE: James Watson Webb papers

DATES: 1819-1890

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 21.75 linear feet

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The James Watson Webb papers consist of correspondence, letterbooks, newspapers, diaries, and miscellanea documenting the personal life and professional career of James Watson Webb and his family, including his second wife, Laura Virginia Cram Webb. The papers document Webb's journalistic and political careers, his personal life, and the activities and observations of his second wife, Laura Virginia Cram Webb, a close confidante to her husband. Major topics of interest include New York politics and life, national politics, the Civil War, foreign relations with France and Brazil, and the social life of New York and Washington, D.C. As a major New York City newspaper publisher and a U.S. diplomat to Brazil, Webb corresponded with such figures as Nicholas Biddle, James Blaine, Lewis Cass, Henry Clay, Hamilton Fish, Abraham Lincoln, William Marcy, Napoleon III, William Seward and others.

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Requesting Instructions

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To order reproductions from this collection, please go to http://www.library.yale.edu/mssa/ifr_copy_order.html. The information you will need to submit an order includes: the collection call number, collection title, series or accession number, box number, and folder number or name.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

The papers were given to Yale University Library by Mrs. William Seward Webb, Col. G. Creighton Webb, F. Edgerton Webb, and the children of Alexander Stewart Webb in 1936. The papers were originally given as the Webb Papers. They have been divided into three collections: the Samuel Blachley Webb Papers, the Alexander Stewart Webb Papers, and the James Watson Webb Papers. Additional James Watson Webb papers were transferred from the Syracuse University Library in 1992 and Shelburne Farms in 2001.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

Unpublished materials authored or otherwise produced by the creator(s) of this collection are in the public domain. There are no restrictions on use. Copyright status for other collection materials is unknown. Transmission or reproduction of materials protected by U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.) beyond that allowed by fair use requires the written permission of the copyright owners. Works not in the public domain cannot be commercially exploited without permission of the copyright owners. Responsibility for any use rests exclusively with the user.

Preferred Citation

James Watson Webb Papers (MS 683). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Biographical / Historical

James Watson Webb was born in Claverack, New York on February 8, 1802. Webb's military career included service in Illinois during the 1820s. In 1827 his journalistic career began with the acquisition of the New York Morning Courier. In 1829 he acquired and merged the New York Enquirer with the Courier. In 1861 he sold his newspaper interest to the New York World. Webb was a nationally prominent journalist and editor whose writings sometimes resulted in libel suits and duels. During the Civil War he held the diplomatic post of Minister to Brazil, in support of the Union cause. He married twice, in 1823, and in 1849, to Laura Virginia Cram. He died on June 7, 1884.

Scope and Contents

The papers consist of correspondence, letterbooks, diaries, newspapers, and miscellanea documenting the personal life and professional career of James Watson Webb (1802-1884) and his family, including his second, wife Laura Virginia Cram Webb. The papers document Webb's journalistic and political careers, his personal life, and the activities and observations of his second wife, who was a close confidante to her husband. Major topics of interest include New York politics and life, national politics, the Civil War, foreign relations with France and Brazil, and the social life of New York and Washington, D.C. As a major New York City newspaper publisher and a U.S. diplomat to Brazil, Webb corresponded with such figures as: James Blaine, Lewis Cass, Henry Clay, Hamilton Fish, Abraham Lincoln, William Marcy, Napoleon, III, William Seward, and others.

The James Watson Webb Papers are organized in forty-three (43) boxes and total twenty-one (21) linear feet. The papers are arranged in the following series: I. Correspondence and Papers, 1819-1888; II. Letterbooks, Papers, Newspapers and Miscellanea, 1827-1889; and III. Laura Virginia Cram Webb Diaries and Papers, 1849-1890.

SERIES I, CORRESPONDENCE AND PAPERS, 1819-1888, contains the personal and professional letters of James Watson Webb. *Chronological* files include a small amount of material relating to Webb's early life as a soldier in Illinois and Michigan. The bulk of correspondence focuses on Webb's journalistic career as a newspaper editor in New York and as a United States diplomat. Webb's newspaper activities reflected his personal views and political motivations, and he worked to make the *New York Courier* the largest circulating paper in the country. In the era of Jacksonian politics Webb corresponded with such figures as Nicholas Biddle, James Gordon Bennett, James G. Blaine, Lewis Cass, Henry Clay, Edward Everett, Hamilton Fish, Amos Kendall, William Marcy, Mordecai M. Noah, William Seward, Thurlow Weed, Daniel Webster and many others.

In his transition from Jacksonian Democrat to Whig Party member, Webb seldom failed to touch upon a major political issue or individual in his correspondence and writings. His newspaper battles occasionally resulted in a resort to the gentleman's "code of honor," or a duel. One such instance involved Webb and Congressman Thomas F. Marshall of Kentucky. The resulting arrest, trial, and conviction of Webb in 1842 generated a great deal of support for him. Correspondence with Governor William Seward, a friend who advised Webb on how to obtain a pardon, and a letterbook containing numerous notes of support (SERIES II, box 32, folder 263) document this incident.

A verbal duel with the novelist James Fenimore Cooper, which culminated in a series of libel suits against Webb and the *Courier*, is also documented. Transcripts of court testimony and other material from 1833-1843 are included in this section. Correspondence relating to Webb's ill-fated appointment as charge d'affaires to Austria (1850) and his later appointment as minister to Brazil (1861) detail his political career (see also: SERIES II, boxes 33-35).

Select files contain a small quantity of personal correspondence, primarily from Webb's children, although letters from Daniel Webster are also organized in this section.

SERIES II, LETTERBOOKS, PAPERS, NEWSPAPERS, AND MISCELLANEA, 1827-1889, contains correspondence, in the form of letterbooks and letterpress copy-books, and other papers, including selected issues of newspapers which Webb published or retained for informational purposes. A small quantity of pictorial material is also included in this series.

Letterbooks includes a volume of letters relating to Webb's conviction and pardon for dueling (1842). *Letterpress Copybooks* contains two volumes relating to Webb's diplomatic duties, including letters from Napoleon, III.

SERIES III, LAURA VIRGINIA CRAM WEBB DIARIES AND PAPERS, 1849-1890, contains several volumes of a personal diary maintained by Webb's second wife from 1849-1890. The entries provide a vague if somewhat routine account of the daily lives of the Webbs. Additional material includes a volume documenting the work of many household servants employed by the Webb family.

Arrangement

Arranged in three series and two additions: I. Correspondence and Papers, 1819-1888. II. Letterbooks, Papers, Newspapers and Miscellanea, 1827-1889. III. Laura Virginia Cram Webb Diaries and Papers, 1849-1890.

Collection Contents

Series I: CORRESPONDENCE AND PAPERS, 1819-1888

130' (31 boxes)

This series is divided into two sections: *Chronological* and *Select*.

Chronological

b. 1, f. 1-14	1819-1841 January See also: box 37, folder 305	1819-1841 January
b. 2, f. 15-30	1841 February-1843 March	1841 February-1843 March
b. 3, f. 31-44	1843 April-1845 June	1843 April-1845 June
b. 4, f. 45-60	1845 July-1850 June	1845 July-1850 June
b. 5, f. 61-74	1850 July-1856	1850 July-1856
b. 6, f. 75-87	1857-1861 July	1857-1861 July
b. 7, f. 88-96	1861 August-1862 July	1861 August-1862 July
b. 8, f. 97-103	1862 April-July	1862 April-July
b. 9, f. 104-110	1862 August-November	1862 August- November
b. 10, f. 111-117	1862 December-1863 May 22	1862 December-1863 May 22
b. 11, f. 118-125	1863 May 23-August	1863 May 23- August
b. 12, f. 126-131	1863 September-December	1863 September- December
b. 12, f. 132	1863: Steamship concession See also: box 37, folder 305	1863: Steamship concession
b. 13, f. 133-140	1864 January-July	1864 January- July
b. 14, f. 141-147	1864 August-December	1864 August- December
b. 15, f. 148-154	1865 January-June	1865 January- June

Chronological (continued)

b. 16, f. 155-160	1865 July-1866 July See also: box 37, folder 305	1865 July-1866 July
b. 17, f. 161-167	1866 August-1867 April	1866 August-1867 April
b. 18, f. 168-174	1867 May-September	1867 May-September
b. 19, f. 175-181	1867 October-1868 April	1867 October-1868 April
b. 20, f. 182-187	1868 May-September 25	1868 May-September 25
b. 21, f. 188-195	1868 September 26-1869 April	1868 September 26-1869 April
b. 22, f. 196-201	1869 May-1870 July	1869 May-1870 July
b. 23, f. 202-207	1870 August-1871	1870 August-1871
b. 24, f. 208-214	1872-1873 June	1872-1873 June
b. 25, f. 215-220	1873 July-1875 April	1873 July-1875 April
b. 26, f. 221-227	1875 May-1877	1875 May-1877
b. 27, f. 228-234	1878-1884 June	1878-1884 June
b. 28, f. 235-241	1884 July-1888	1884 July-1888
<u>Select</u>		
b. 29, f. 242-248	A-L	undated
b. 30, f. 249-253	M-Webb, Frank	undated
b. 30, f. 254	Webb, George Creighton	undated
b. 30, f. 254	Webb, Helen L.	undated
b. 30, f. 255	Webb, Henry Watter	undated
b. 31, f. 256	Webb, Jacob Louis	undated
b. 31, f. 257	Webb, James Watson (correspondence with children)	undated
b. 31, f. 258	Webb, Kate	undated
b. 31, f. 258	Webb, Laura Virinia	undated
b. 31, f. 259	Webb, Leila-Webb, Lilly	undated

Select (continued)

b. 31, f. 260	Webb, Louise-Webb, Stephen	undated
b. 31, f. 261	Webb, William Seward	undated
b. 31, f. 262	Webster, Daniel-Y, unidentified	undated

Series II: LETTERBOOKS, PAPERS, NEWSPAPERS, AND MISCELLANEA, 1827-1889

6.0' (6 boxes)

This series is divided into four sections: *Letterbooks*, *Papers*, *Newspapers*, and *Miscellanea*.

<u>Letterbooks</u>		
b. 32, f. 263	1842 September 12-November 26	1842 September 12-November 26
b. 33, f. 264	1859-1870	1859-1870
<u>Letterpress copybooks</u>		
b. 33, f. 265	1862 January 6-1868 October 15	1862 January 6-1868 October 15
b. 34, f. 266	1861 October 5-1865 July 12	1861 October 5-1865 July 12
<u>Papers</u>		
b. 35, f. 267-269	Account books	1856-1874
b. 35, f. 270	Calling cards, invitations	undated
b. 35, f. 271	Maps	undated
b. 35, f. 272	Notebook: family genealogy	undated
b. 35, f. 273-275	Papers	undated
b. 36, f. 276-278	Papers	undated
<u>Printed material</u>		
b. 36, f. 279	Biographical data	1858
b. 36, f. 280	<i>Facts for the People</i> English	1853-1854
b. 36, f. 281	Miscellanea	1869, 1871, undated
b. 36, f. 282-285	<i>Facts for the People</i> English	1834-1869
<u>Newspapers</u>		
b. 37, f. 286-296	General	1827-1885
b. 37, f. 297	Miscellanea	1852-1889
<u>Select</u>		
b. 37, f. 298	Biographical sketches	1873, 1882

Newspapers > Select (continued)

b. 37, f. 299	Brazil	1869
b. 37, f. 300	Civil War	1861
b. 37, f. 301	Cuba	1869-1873
b. 37, f. 302-303	<i>New York Morning Courier-Enquirer</i> English	1853-1854
b. 37, f. 304	<i>New York Tribune</i> English	1863-1880
<u>Miscellanea</u>		
b. 37, f. 305	Correspondence and papers: oversize	1839-1840, 1863, 1866
b. 37, f. 306	Photographs, pictorial material, embroidery	undated

Series III: LAURA VIRGINIA WEBB DIARIES AND PAPERS, 1849-1890

2 linear feet (6 boxes)

This series is divided into two sections: *Diaries* and *Papers*

Diaries

Many of the diaries are missing pages or portions of pages. It is unknown who removed the material. The varying methods suggest that more than one person may have been responsible and that it was done prior to receipt by the repository.

b. 38, f. 307-314	1849-1859	1849-1859
b. 39, f. 315-321	1860-1868 September	1860-1868 September
b. 40, f. 322-331	1868 October-1875 May	1868 October-1875 May
b. 41, f. 332-339	1875 June-1882	1875 June-1882
b. 42, f. 340-346	1884-1890	1884-1890
<u>Papers</u>		
b. 42, f. 347	Dictionary: Portuguese	1860
Notebooks		
b. 43, f. 348	Domestic employees	1851-1858
b. 43, f. 349	Washington, D.C.	1855-1857
b. 43, f. 350	Inventory	1857-1870
b. 43, f. 351	Miscellanea	1859-1889, undated

Accession 1992-M-083: Additional Material

This addition is comprised of correspondence, arranged in two sections: incoming and outgoing. Each section is arranged alphabetically by author. The majority of the letters concern James Watson Webb’s views on state and national politics, business affairs, social relations, and his attempts to be appointed Postmaster of New York City in 1841. A few letters relate to personal matters such as his wife’s death and the baptism of his child. The letters range in date from the 1820s to the 1850s.

	Correspondence, incoming
b. 1, f. 1	A-G
b. 1, f. 2	H-Z
b. 1, f. 3	Correspondence, outgoing

Accession 2002-M-018: Additional Material

b. 1, f. 3	Ledger containing records of provisions for the United States Army kept by Lieutenants Benjamin Walker and James Watson Webb, ca. 1823-1835
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Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Armed Forces
Editors
Journalism
Journalists
Newspapers
Women

Geographic Names

Brazil
France
Latin America
New York (N.Y.)
New York (State)
United States -- Foreign relations
United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865
United States -- Politics and government

Macaulay, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Baron, 1800-1859
Mangum, Willie Person, 1792-1861
Marcy, William L. (William Learned), 1786-1857
Napoleon, Emperor of the French, III, 1808-1873
Noah, M. M. (Mordecai Manuel), 1785-1851
Payne, John Howard, 1791-1852
Ponsonby, Richard Ponsonby, 1807-1866
Raymond, Henry J. (Henry Jarvis), 1820-1869
Scott, Winfield, 1786-1866
Seward, William H. (William Henry), 1801-1872
Taylor, Zachary, 1784-1850
Webster, Daniel, 1782-1852
Weed, Thurlow, 1797-1882

Genres / Formats

Diaries

Names

Adams, John Quincy, 1767-1848
Barnum, P. T. (Phineas Taylor), 1810-1891
Bennett, James Gordon, 1795-1872
Biddle, Nicholas, 1786-1844
Blaine, James Gillespie, 1830-1893
Buchanan, James, 1791-1868
Byron, George Anson Byron, Baron, 1789-1868
Cameron, Simon, 1799-1889
Cass, Lewis, 1782-1866
Clay, Henry, 1777-1852
Cooper, James Fenimore, 1789-1851
Everett, Edward, 1794-1865
Fillmore, Millard, 1800-1874
Fish, Hamilton, 1808-1893
Frémont, John Charles, 1813-1890
Hamlin, Hannibal, 1809-1891
Hull, Isaac, 1773-1843
Irving, Washington, 1783-1859
Johnson, Reverdy, 1796-1876
Kendall, Amos, 1789-1869
Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865