

Charles Wilkes Papers
A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress



Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
2003

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Revised and expanded by Laura J. Kells

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Collection Summary

Title: Charles Wilkes Papers

Span Dates: 1607-1959

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1841-1865)

ID No.: MSS45716

Creator: Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877

Size: 6,500 items

Size: 45 containers plus 3 oversize plus 1 vault

Size: 18 linear feet

Size: 26 microfilm reels

Language: Collection material in English

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

LC Catalog record: <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm75045716>

Summary: Naval officer and explorer. Official and family correspondence, journals and diaries, legal and financial papers, autobiography and other writings, and scientific notebooks relating to Wilkes's command of an expedition (1838-1842) to the Antarctic, Hawaii and various other Pacific islands, and the northwest coast of the United States; his capture of J. M. Mason and John Slidell in the *Trent* affair (1861); and his command of the James River Flotilla and West India Squadron during the Civil War. Includes legal and business papers of the Wilkes family in England.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

People

Agassiz, Louis, 1807-1873--Correspondence.
Bolton, William Compton, -1849--Correspondence.
Dana, James Dwight, 1813-1895--Correspondence.
Drayton, Joseph--Correspondence.
Gray, Asa, 1810-1888--Correspondence.
Mason, J. M. (James Murray), 1798-1871.
McClellan, George B. (George Brinton), 1826-1885--Correspondence.
Slidell, John, 1793-1871.
Stuart, Fred D.--Correspondence.
Welles, Gideon, 1802-1878--Correspondence.
Wilkes family.
Wilkes, Charles, 1798-1877.
Wilkes, Eliza--Correspondence.
Wilkes, Jane Renwick, -1843--Correspondence.
Wilkes, Jane--Correspondence.
Wilkes, John, 1827-1908--Correspondence.
Wilkes, Mary Lynch Bolton--Correspondence.

Organizations

Confederate States of America. Navy.
United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842)
United States. Navy. James River Flotilla.
United States. Navy. Potomac Flotilla.
United States. Navy. West India Squadron.

Subjects

Astronomy.
Cholera--Germany.
Maps.

Meteorology--Observations.
Scientific expeditions--Antarctica.
Scientific expeditions--Hawaii.
Scientific expeditions--Oceania.
Tides.
Trent Affair, 1861.

Places

Antarctica--Discovery and exploration.
Hawaii--Discovery and exploration.
Oceania--Discovery and exploration.
United States--Commerce.
United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Naval operations.
United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.
United States--Politics and government--1861-1865.

Occupations

Explorers.
Naval officers.

Provenance

The papers of Charles Wilkes, naval officer and explorer, were chiefly the gift of Rosalee Lockwood-Jones, Mrs. M. L. Hull, and C. Denby Wilkes, 1921-1964. An addition was given by Gilbert Wilkes in 2002. A second addition was donated by the Wilkes family from the estate of Gilbert Wilkes.

Processing History

The papers of Charles Wilkes were processed in 1975. The register was revised in 1999 and 2003. Material received in 2002 was added to the collection in 2003. A second addition was processed in 2010.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Charles Wilkes is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Charles Wilkes are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Microfilm

A microfilm edition of part of these papers is available on twenty-six reels. Consult reference staff in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase or interlibrary loan. To promote preservation of the originals, researchers are required to consult the microfilm edition as available.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, Charles Wilkes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

Date	Event
1798, Apr. 3	Born, New York, N.Y.
1815	Entered the merchant marine
1818	Appointed midshipman
1826	Married Jane Jeffrey Renwick (died 1843) Promoted to lieutenant
1833	Headed the Depot of Charts and Instruments, Washington, D.C., which later became the Naval Observatory
1838-1842	Commanded an expedition to the Antarctic, islands of the Pacific Ocean, and the American northwest coast
1843-1863	On special duty, chiefly in Washington, D.C., preparing for publication of information gathered from the expedition
1845	Published <i>Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition</i> . Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard. 5 vols.
1849	Published <i>Western America</i> . Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard
1851	Published <i>Meteorology</i> . Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman
1854	Married Mary H. Lynch Bolton
1857	Published <i>Theory of Zodiacal Light</i> . Philadelphia: C. Sherman & Son, Printers
1858	Published <i>Hydrography</i> . Philadelphia: Printed by C. Sherman
1859	Published <i>On the Circulation of the Oceans</i> . Philadelphia Published <i>Report on the Examination of the Deep River District, North Carolina</i> . [Washington, D.C.]
1861	While in command of the <i>San Jacinto</i> , halted the British mail steamer <i>Trent</i> and forcibly removed Confederate commissioners J. M. Mason and John Slidell
1862	Placed in command of the James River Flotilla; transferred to the command of the Potomac River Flotilla; later commanded the West India Squadron
1863	Recalled to Washington, D.C.
1864	Court-martialed
1866	Commissioned rear admiral on the retired list
1877, Feb. 8	Died, Washington, D.C.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Charles Wilkes (1798-1877) span the years 1607-1959, with the bulk of the material dated between 1841 and 1865. The collection contains [family](#), [official](#), and [general correspondence](#) of Charles Wilkes, letterbooks of Wilkes and another United States naval officer, [journals and diaries](#), a draft [autobiography](#), scientific tracts and notes detailing weather and tidal observations, genealogical charts, newspaper clippings, Confederate currency, and printed matter. There are also marriage and building contracts, leases, inventories, promissory notes, trust agreements, and debt records dating from the seventeenth century that relate to the [Wilkes family](#) in England and America.

The papers illustrate much of Wilkes's career, including his command of an [expedition](#) of 1838-1842, which engaged in surveys and exploration of the Antarctic, islands in the Pacific Ocean, and the northwest coast of the United States. The collection also covers Wilkes's seizure of Confederate commissioners J. M. Mason and John Slidell aboard the British mail steamer *Trent* in 1861. Notebooks, observation records, and correspondence relate to the expedition, but most of the material relates to his special duty in Washington, D.C., in the period 1843-1861, when Wilkes consolidated the scientific data gathered on the mission and prepared his narrative of the voyage together with other scientific volumes for publication. With these publications came a measure of fame and recognition, not only as an explorer but also as a nautical scientist.

Wilkes's capture of the *Trent* is chiefly reflected in his correspondence for the period 1861-1862, which contains letters from committees honoring him and letters indicating favorable public reaction. More vividly portrayed are Wilkes's

commands in 1862 of the James and Potomac River flotillas and of the West India Squadron operating near the Bahamas against Confederate commerce destroyers. The [General Correspondence](#) and [Letterbooks](#) series contain an exchange of letters between Gideon Welles, George Brinton McClellan, and Wilkes touching upon the military operations of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. Scattered references throughout the papers relate to Wilkes's [business](#) interests in the South, especially in North Carolina.

Correspondence in the papers also pertains to the Wilkes family. Included in the [Family Correspondence](#) series are letters of Charles Wilkes, his son John, daughters Jane and Eliza, his wives, Jane Renwick and Mary Lynch Bolton, and cousins and other family members. Their letters chronicle the family's celebrations and tragedies as well as their activities and interests prior to the Civil War.

Wilkes's daily records in the [Journals and Diaries](#) series record events of special interest and supplement those periods lacking in correspondence. His autobiography provides information relating to his career and personal life.

The [Miscellany](#) series includes three official letterbooks of William Compton Bolton, a United States naval officer and the first husband of Wilkes's second wife, Mary Lynch Bolton. Prior to his death in 1848, Bolton and his wife were close companions of the Wilkeses in Washington society. Originally named William Compton Bolton Finch, his name was changed in 1833. The name Finch appears on the first two volumes.

Frequent correspondents in the papers include Louis Agassiz, James Dana, Joseph Drayton, Asa Gray, George Brinton McClellan, Fred D. Stuart, and Gideon Welles.

Two [additions](#) consist primarily of letters written by Wilkes to his wife, Mary, in 1863 while he was in command of the West India Squadron. The letters were sent from Cuba, the Bahamas, and Haiti. Wilkes described life at sea and efforts to capture Confederate destroyers and protect United States commerce during the Civil War and expressed his dissatisfaction with the leadership of the country. Letters from other family members relate personal news including an outbreak of cholera in Germany in 1873.

Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in thirteen series:

- [Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875](#)
- [Letterbooks, 1841-1863](#)
- [Family Correspondence, 1836-1915](#)
- [General Correspondence, 1835-1876](#)
- [Official Correspondence, 1862-1863](#)
- [Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940](#)
- [Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877](#)
- [Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876](#)
- [Miscellany, 1817-1921](#)
- [Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959](#)
- [Additions, 1861-1873](#)
- [Oversize, 1861](#)
- [Vault, 1864](#)

Description of Series

Container	Series
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	<p><u>Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875</u></p> <p>Diaries and journals. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 2-5 REEL 5-9	<p><u>Letterbooks, 1841-1863</u></p> <p>Bound letterpress and handwritten copies of letters sent including official and private correspondence. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 6-12 REEL 9-14	<p><u>Family Correspondence, 1836-1915</u></p> <p>Predominantly letters exchanged between members of the Wilkes family. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 13-16 REEL 14-17	<p><u>General Correspondence, 1835-1876</u></p> <p>Letters received and sent. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 17-19 REEL 17-18	<p><u>Official Correspondence, 1862-1863</u></p> <p>Letters sent to and from the Navy Department, the secretary of the navy, and the Army Department. Arranged chronologically.</p>
BOX 20-21 REEL 18-19	<p><u>Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940</u></p> <p>Correspondence, drafts of a narrative of the expedition, maps, notebooks, computation tables, lists, reports, and printed matter. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.</p>
BOX 22-25 REEL 20-24	<p><u>Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877</u></p> <p>Autobiography, essays and sketches by Wilkes. Arranged by type of material.</p>
BOX 26-27 REEL 24	<p><u>Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876</u></p> <p>Maps, drawings, reports, account books, copyrights, deeds, and miscellaneous material relating to property rights. Arranged by type of material.</p>
BOX 28-30 REEL 25-26	<p><u>Miscellany, 1817-1921</u></p> <p>A scrapbook, newspaper clippings, photographs, maps, sketches, naval registers, printed matter, and miscellaneous correspondence. Included are three letterbooks belonging to William Compton Bolton. Arranged by subject or by type of material.</p>
BOX 31-45 REEL 26	<p><u>Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959</u></p> <p>Documents predominantly of a business and legal nature including apprenticeship papers, bonds, deeds, marriage contracts, and mortgages relating to the Wilkes family in England and America. Also genealogical charts, a published genealogy, and an onomastic index to many of the family records in the papers.</p>

Indexed family papers are arranged chronologically.
Containers 32-45 not filmed

BOX 45 not filmed

Additions, 1861-1873

Correspondence and writings.

Arranged in order of processing date and therein by type of material.

BOX OV 1

Oversize, 1861

A map, proclamation, and genealogical charts.

Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed.

BOX VA 1

Vault, 1864

Confederate currency and bond.

Arranged and described according to the series, folder, and container from which the items were removed.

Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	Journals and Diaries, 1841-1875 Diaries and journals. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 1 REEL 1-4	1841-1875 (24 vols.)
BOX 2-5 REEL 5-9	Letterbooks, 1841-1863 Bound letterpress and handwritten copies of letters sent including official and private correspondence. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 2 REEL 5-6	1841, May 17-1847, Dec. 30 1848, Nov. 22-1850, Feb. 16 1850, Feb. 16-1851, Jan. 17
BOX 3 REEL 6-7	1851, Jan. 18-1854, Dec. 9 1857, Jan. 16-Oct. 25 1857, Nov. 5-1859, Feb. 13
BOX 4 REEL 7-8	1859, Feb. 17-1861, Apr. 22 1862 May 12-22 July 18- Aug. 10 Aug. 10- Sept. 2 Sept. 6-22
BOX 5 REEL 8-9	Sept. 30- Nov. 30 1862, Nov. 11-1863, Jan. 2 1863 Jan. 3-Feb. 2 Feb. 2-26 Mar. 4-Apr. 4 Apr. 4-May 12 May 12-27 May 21- June 18 June 18
BOX 6-12 REEL 9-14	Family Correspondence, 1836-1915 Predominantly letters exchanged between members of the Wilkes family. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 6 REEL 9-10	1836, Oct.-1850, July (13 folders)
BOX 7 REEL 10-11	Aug. 1850-May 1853 (10 folders)

Family Correspondence, 1836-1915

Container	Contents
BOX 8 REEL 11	1853, June-1855, Dec. (10 folders)
BOX 9 REEL 12	1856, Jan.-1858, Aug. (12 folders)
BOX 10 REEL 12-13	1858, Sept.-1862, Oct. (14 folders)
BOX 11 REEL 13	1863, Jan.-1867, Oct.; 1887, May (12 folders)
BOX 12 REEL 14	1895, July-1915, Oct. (7 folders) Undated (3 folders)
BOX 13-16 REEL 14-17	General Correspondence, 1835-1876 Letters received and sent. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 13 REEL 14-15	1835-1856 (22 folders)
BOX 14 REEL 15-16	1857-1862 (22 folders)
BOX 15 REEL 16	1863-1870 (10 folders)
BOX 16 REEL 17	1871-1876, undated (6 folders) Fragments, undated
BOX 17-19 REEL 17-18	Official Correspondence, 1862-1863 Letters sent to and from the Navy Department, the secretary of the navy, and the Army Department. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 17	1862, July 6-Dec. 18 (8 folders)
BOX 18 REEL 17-18	1862, Dec. 19-1863, May 11 (7 folders)
BOX 19 REEL 18	1863, May 12-July 30, undated (4 folders)
BOX 20-21 REEL 18-19	Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940 Correspondence, drafts of a narrative of the expedition, maps, notebooks, computation tables, lists, reports, and printed matter. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
BOX 20 REEL 18-19	Correspondence, 1940 Maps, Antarctica and Hawaii <i>See also Oversize</i> Narrative, 1838 Bound volume Shortened copy

Expedition File, 1828-1863, 1940

Container	Contents
	Notebooks Use of astronomical instruments, [1828?] "Instructions to New Officers on Methods of Surveying Used in the Expedition," 1858
	Observations Weather and tidal observations, 1839
BOX 21 REEL 19	Journal of tides, air, and water observations, 1839-1840 General, 1841 Columbia River, undated Pendulum on Mauna Loa, computations, 1841
	Publications Correspondence on publications concerning the expedition, 1842-1862 <i>Zoology</i> , by Titian Ramsay Peale, introduction to, 1846-1848
	Reports American Philosophical Society and the United States Naval Lyceum, 1836 Joint Committee on the Library, United States Congress, 1858-1859 Soo Loo agreement, 1842
	Surveys, original list of islands discovered and surveyed for the first time, undated Naval hearings, charges and defense of Wilkes, 1842, 1847 Miscellany, 1861-1863, undated
BOX 22-25 REEL 20-24	Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877 Autobiography, essays and sketches by Wilkes. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 22 REEL 20-21	Autobiography Draft Vols. 1-8 (4 folders)
BOX 23 REEL 22-23	Vols. 9-10 Typescript pp. 1-300 (3 folders)
BOX 24 REEL 23	pp. 301-882 (6 folders)
	Essays and sketches Report on the examination of the Deep River District, North Carolina, 1858 (2 folders) "Theory of the Winds," 1855 (2 folders)
BOX 25 REEL 24	"On the Circulation of the Oceans," 1859 "Visit to Tunis" and "The Housewife," 1859 "The Student's Lamp," "In Turn," and "Christmas Story," 1859 "On Postal Arrangements," "How I Was Cured of Going to Fires," and "Sketches of Biography," 1859 "Some Days in the Session," 1877 "Reasons for Taking the <i>Vanderbilt</i> Under Command," 1863 "A Diary From the South Sea Islands," undated

Autobiography and Other Writings, 1855-1877

Container	Contents
	Description of a trip through the Midwest, undated
BOX 26-27 REEL 24	Financial and Business Papers, 1833-1876 Maps, drawings, reports, account books, copyrights, deeds, and miscellaneous material relating to property rights. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 26 REEL 24	Maps and papers relating to the Dauphine and Susquehanna Coal Co., undated Drawings of blast furnaces, scales, and coal kilns, undated Map indicating Wilkes property in Washington, D.C., undated Report on the High Shoals property in Gaston County, N.C., undated Account book, 1870 Bills, checks, and receipts, 1850-1873 (1 folder)
BOX 27 REEL 24	(3 folders) Copyrights, deeds, and property rights, 1833-1876, undated
BOX 28-30 REEL 25-26	Miscellany, 1817-1921 A scrapbook, newspaper clippings, photographs, maps, sketches, naval registers, printed matter, and miscellaneous correspondence. Included are three letterbooks belonging to William Compton Bolton. Arranged by subject or by type of material.
BOX 28 REEL 25	Bills, letters, and notes relating to the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1867-1869 Navy registers, 1828-1831, 1845 Coast Survey, 1855 Court-martial defense of Wilkes, 1864 <i>United States v. S.S. Peterhoff</i> , 1864 Maps and papers relating to Deep River District of North Carolina, 1851-1857, undated Biographical sketches of Wilkes, 1912, undated <i>Trent</i> affair, monographs, 1861-1865, undated <i>See also Oversize</i> Winds and Currents of the Sea, by Matthew Fontaine Maury, 1851
BOX 29 REEL 25-26	Confederate money and bond, 1864 <i>See Vault</i> Photographs, 1900, undated Scrapbook, 1856-1913, undated General, 1846-1921, undated Newspaper clippings (3 folders)
BOX 30 REEL 26	Letterbooks of William Compton Bolton (formerly William Compton Bolton Finch) 1817, Dec. 11-1818, Dec. 9 1823, Nov. 4-1824, May 11 1839, June 13-1841, Mar. 9
not filmed	Interest statements, lists, and receipts, 1870-1873, undated
BOX 31-45 REEL 26	Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959 Documents predominantly of a business and legal nature including apprenticeship papers, bonds, deeds, marriage contracts, and mortgages relating to the Wilkes family in England

Family Papers and Genealogy, 1607-1959

Container

Contents

and America. Also genealogical charts, a published genealogy, and an onomastic index to many of the family records in the papers.
Indexed family papers are arranged chronologically.
Containers 32-45 not filmed

- BOX 31 REEL 26** Agreements, appraisals, building estimates, debt records, letters, receipts, inventories, termination of trusts, 1669-1814
Onomastic index, a partial index of the Wilkes family parchments and other family records contained in the papers, undated
Wilkes chronology, 1959
Genealogical notes pertaining to the Wilkes family, typewritten copies, 1728-1869
- BOX 32 not filmed** Indexed documents
Index, 1951
Nos. 1-11, 1607-1616, 1635, 1644
(12 folders)
- BOX 33** Nos. 12-25, 1646-1647, 1655-1667, 1679-1684
(14 folders)
- BOX 34** Nos. 26-36, 1685, 1693-1698
(11 folders)
- BOX 35** Nos. 37-46, 1701-1705
(10 folders)
- BOX 36** Nos. 47-57, 1706-1710
(11 folders)
- BOX 37** Nos. 58-64, 1714-1718
(7 folders)
- BOX 38** Nos. 65-72, 1720-1727
(8 folders)
- BOX 39** Nos. 73-79, 1728-1735
(7 folders)
- BOX 40** Nos. 80-87, 1738-1745
(9 folders)
- BOX 41** Nos. 88-94, 1746-1747
(7 folders)
- BOX 42** Nos. 88-94, 1746-1747
(7 folders)
- BOX 43** Nos. 101-105, 1757-1760
(5 folders)
- BOX 44** Nos. 106-115, 1761-1771, 1784
(10 folders)
- BOX 45** Nos. 116-117, 1791-1792
(3 folders)
Genealogical charts, undated *See also Oversize*
Miscellaneous documents, 1683-1684, 1712-1747, 1761, 1790, undated
(4 folders)
- BOX 45 not filmed** **Additions, 1861-1873**
Correspondence and writings.
Arranged in order of processing date and therein by type of material.

Additions, 1861-1873

Container	Contents
BOX 45	2003 addition Correspondence, 1861-1863, undated Writings on High Shoals, N.C., undated 2010 addition Correspondence, 1861-1863, 1873
BOX OV 1	Oversize, 1861 A map, proclamation, and genealogical charts. Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed.
BOX OV 1	Expedition File Maps Hawaii, circa 1841 (Container 20) (filmed in original location, Reel 18)
BOX OV 2	Miscellany <i>Trent</i> affair, proclamation, 1861 (<i>Container 28</i>)
BOX OV 3	Family Papers and Genealogy Genealogical charts, undated (<i>Container 45</i>)
BOX VA 1	Vault, 1864 Confederate currency and bond. Arranged and described according to the series, folder, and container from which the items were removed.
BOX VA 1	Miscellany Confederate money and bond, 1864 (Container 29; Reel 25)