

William Thornton Papers
A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress



Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
2023

Contact information: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact>

Catalog Record: <https://lcn.loc.gov/mm80042895>

Additional search options available at: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms006027>

Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress Manuscript Division, 2006
Revised 2023 August

Collection Summary

Title: William Thornton Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1741-1865

ID No.: MSS42895

Creator: Thornton, William, 1759-1828

Extent: 3,400 items

Extent: 20 containers plus 2 oversize

Extent: 5.0 linear feet

Extent: 7 microfilm reels

Language: Collection material in English

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

LC Catalog record: <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm80042895>

Summary: Architect, inventor, and superintendent of patents. Diaries, architectural drawings, and other papers pertaining to the development of the steamboat, African-American colonization and emigration, the revolt of Spanish colonies in South America, Greek independence, and Thornton's disputes with Benjamin Latrobe over designs for the United States Capitol.

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

Adams, John Quincy, 1767-1848--Correspondence.

Adams, Louisa Catherine, 1775-1852--Correspondence.

Banks, Joseph, 1743-1820--Correspondence.

Carroll, Daniel, 1764-1849--Correspondence.

Ellicott, Andrew, 1754-1820--Correspondence.

Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790--Correspondence.

Fulton, Robert, 1765-1815--Correspondence.

Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826--Correspondence.

Latrobe, Benjamin Henry, 1764-1820.

Lettsom, John Coakley, 1744-1815--Correspondence.

Madison, James, 1751-1836--Correspondence.

Thornton, Anna Maria Brodeau, 1775?-1865. Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton papers.

Thornton, William, 1759-1828.

Washington, George, 1732-1799--Correspondence.

Wilkinson, Thomas, 1751-1836--Correspondence.

Wirt, William, 1772-1834--Correspondence.

Wistar, Caspar, 1761-1818--Correspondence.

Organizations

District of Columbia. Commissioner.

United States Capitol (Washington, D.C.)

Subjects

African Americans--Colonization--Africa.

Patents--United States.

Slavery--United States.

Steamboats.

Places

Greece--History--1453-1821.

South America--History--Wars of Independence, 1806-1830.

Spain--Colonies--America.

Occupations

Architects.

Inventors.

Superintendents of patents.

Acquisition Information

The papers of William Thornton were given to the Library of Congress by J. Henley Smith in 1904. Additional gifts, purchases, and transfers were made 1921-1991.

Processing History

The papers of William Thornton were prepared for microfilming in 1973 by Paul A. Robinson. The finding aid was revised and an item that had previously been cataloged separately was added to the collection in 2003 by Patrick Kerwin, Marianne Riley, and Lia Apodaca. Diaries of Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton were transferred to the papers of Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division in 1967. The finding aid was updated in 2023 by Maria Farmer as part of a division-wide remediation project by the Inclusive Description Working Group.

Additional Guides

Portions of the collection were published by A. C. Clark in the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, vol. xviii (Washington, D.C.: The Society, 1915).

Transfers

Architectural drawings have been transferred to Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of these papers.

Related Material

The papers of [Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton](#), 1793-1861, consisting of seven bound volumes containing diaries, journals, essays, and details about social life and household matters, are also held at the Library of Congress.

Copyright Status

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

Access and Restrictions

The papers of William Thornton 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 seven 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, William Thornton Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

Date	Event
1759, May 20	Born, community of the Society of Friends, Jost van Dyke Island, Tortola, Virgin Islands
1764	Immigrated to England
1778-1790	Involved with John Fitch in experiments with paddle steamboats
1784	M.D. degree, Aberdeen University, Aberdeen, Scotland
1787	Immigrated to the United States
1788	Became an American citizen
1789	Awarded a share in the Library Company of Philadelphia for submitting the building design chosen for the new library
1790	Married Anna Maria Brodeau
1790-1792	Returned to Tortola, Virgin Islands
1792	Moved to Washington, D.C. Submitted design proposals for the United States Capitol
1793	Design for the United States Capitol accepted Published <i>Cadmus: or, a Treatise on the Elements of Written Language</i> . Philadelphia: Aitken & Son; awarded the Magellanic gold medal of the American Philosophical Society for this publication
1794-1802	Commissioner, City Board of Commissioners, Washington, D.C.
1798-1802	Built Octagon House in Washington, D.C., for Colonel John Tayloe
1802-1828	Superintendent of patents
1804	Published <i>Political Economy: Founded in Justice and Humanity</i> . Washington, D.C.: Samuel Harrison Smith
1812	Tudor Place, Georgetown, Washington, D.C., built from his designs
1814	Helped prevent the destruction of the United States Patent Office by British troops
1828, Mar. 28	Died, Washington, D.C.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of William Thornton (1759-1828) span the years 1741-1865 and consist chiefly of writings, correspondence, diaries, notebooks, papers of his wife Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton, and miscellaneous material. The collection is organized in five series: [Correspondence and Other Material](#), [Writings](#), [Miscellany](#), an [Addition](#), and [Oversize](#).

Items in the [Correspondence and Other Material](#) series concern Thornton's interest in the development of the steamboat, his dispute with Benjamin H. Latrobe over designs for the United States capitol, his efforts to free enslaved people through African colonization, and his appointments as a commissioner of Washington, D.C., and as superintendent of patents for the State Department. Other subjects include his writings, paintings, and architectural interests outside of Washington.

The Writings series includes drafts of *Cadmus: or, a Treatise on the Elements of the Written Language* and ten volumes of writings on various topics, two of which are titled “Julia” and “Lucy.” Other writings concern African colonization, religion, sleep, and government.

The Miscellany contains commissions, a diploma, expense books, invitations, a petition from William Thornton, and others to Joseph Lewis, and printed matter.

The collection also includes correspondence concerning Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton's efforts to settle the Thornton estate, personal letters with the Adams family and other friends, her visiting book and bank book, and printed matter.

Correspondents include John Quincy Adams, Louisa Catherine Adams, Joseph Banks, Daniel Carroll, Andrew Ellicott, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, Thomas Jefferson, John Coakley Lettsom, James Madison, George Washington, Thomas Wilkinson, William Wirt, and Caspar Wistar.

Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in five series:

- Correspondence and Other Material, 1741-1858
- Writings, 1793-1829
- Miscellany, 1777-1865
- Addition, 1810-1812
- Oversize, 1784-1813

Description of Series

Container	Series
BOX 1-7 REEL 1-4	<p><u>Correspondence and Other Material, 1741-1858</u></p> <p>Correspondence, invitations, envelopes, photographs, clippings and other printed matter, and miscellaneous material.</p> <p>Arranged chronologically in bound volumes.</p>
BOX 8-17 REEL 4-6	<p><u>Writings, 1793-1829</u></p> <p>Published and unpublished writings.</p> <p>Arranged by subject.</p>
BOX 18-20 REEL 7	<p><u>Miscellany, 1777-1865</u></p> <p>Correspondence, diaries, notebooks, invitations, commissions, a diploma, financial material, notes and other writings, and printed matter.</p> <p>Arranged by topic, name of person, or type of material.</p>
BOX 21 not filmed	<p><u>Addition, 1810-1812</u></p> <p>A letter and a pamphlet.</p> <p>Arranged alphabetically by type of material.</p>
BOX OV 1-OV 3 REEL 2, 7	<p><u>Oversize, 1784-1813</u></p> <p>A diploma, commissions, and a petition.</p> <p>Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed after the microfilm edition was completed.</p>

Container List

Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 15,714

Container	Contents
BOX 1-7 REEL 1-4	Correspondence and Other Material, 1741-1858 Correspondence, invitations, envelopes, photographs, clippings and other printed matter, and miscellaneous material. Arranged chronologically in bound volumes.
BOX 1 REEL 1	1741, Sept. 1-1795, Jan. 20 undated
BOX 2 REEL 1	1795, Jan. 21-1799, Apr. 16
BOX 3 REEL 2	1799, Apr. 17-1811, Jan. 29
BOX 4 REEL 2	1811, Jan. 30-1816, Dec. 26 <i>See also Oversize</i>
BOX 5 REEL 3	1816, Dec. 27-1822, May 22
BOX 6 REEL 3	1822, May 26-1842, Nov. 14
BOX 7 REEL 4	1842, Nov. 16-1858, Jan. 19, undated
BOX 8-17 REEL 4-6	Writings, 1793-1829 Published and unpublished writings. Arranged by subject.
BOX 8-10 REEL 4	Miscellaneous, 1823, undated
BOX 11 REEL 5	<i>Cadmus: or, a Treatise on the Elements of the Written Language</i> , 1793-1802, undated <i>For additional material see Container 18 same heading; Reel 7</i>
BOX 12 REEL 5	<i>Julia</i> , undated
BOX 13 REEL 5	<i>Lucy</i> , undated
BOX 14 REEL 5	African colonization, Greece, and other writings, 1804, 1823, undated
BOX 15 REEL 6	Religion, undated
BOX 16 REEL 6	Science, 1825-1827, undated
BOX 17 REEL 6	Sleep, 1829, undated
BOX 18-20 REEL 7	Miscellany, 1777-1865 Correspondence, diaries, notebooks, invitations, commissions, a diploma, financial material, notes and other writings, and printed matter. Arranged by topic, name of person, or type of material.
BOX 18 REEL 7	Visiting book, Anna Maria Brodeau Thornton, 1792-1834 Banks, Joseph, undated Bound copies of letters, 1829-1830, 1865 Bound copies of letters from William Thornton, 1792-1801 <i>Cadmus: or, a Treatise on the Elements of the Written Language</i> , 1793 <i>The Life of Dr. William Thornton</i> , undated Notebook, undated Diaries, 1777-1782
BOX 19 REEL 7	Notebook, circa 1783 Commission, 1784

Miscellany, 1777-1865

Container

Contents

BOX 20 REEL 7	Notebook, 1786 Commission, 1794 <i>See also Oversize</i> Almanac, 1795 Bankbook, 1850 <i>Boston Investigator</i> , 1838 Commission, 1802 <i>See also Oversize</i> Diploma, 1784 <i>See also Oversize</i> Expense books, 1795 <i>Federal Republican</i> , 1813 First annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States, 1818 Invitations, 1802, 1830 (2 folders) <i>La Grece</i> , 1825 <i>National Journal</i> , 1829, June 17 <i>Pennsylvania Packet</i> , 1790 Printed matter, including clippings relating to George Washington memorial, 1799-1862, undated (2 folders) Washington assemblies, 1842, 1849 (2 folders) <i>Washington Gazette</i> , 1821 Petition, Thornton et al., to Joseph Lewis, 1813 <i>See also Oversize</i> Account book, 1798-1799 Expense book, 1794-1804 Thornton, Anna Maria Brodeau, copies of her letters, 1820-1826 Religious studies, extracts, undated Thornton-Latrobe controversy, correspondence, 1798-1806
BOX 21 not filmed	Addition, 1810-1812 A letter and a pamphlet. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.
BOX 21	Correspondence, 1810 Pamphlet, 1812
BOX OV 1-OV 3 REEL 2, 7	Oversize, 1784-1813 A diploma, commissions, and a petition. Arranged and described according to the series, folders, and containers from which the items were removed after the microfilm edition was completed.
BOX OV 1	Correspondence and Other Material 1811, June 6 (<i>Container 4; Reel 2</i>) Miscellany Commission, 1794 (<i>Container 19; Reel 7</i>) Commission, 1802 (<i>Container 20; Reel 7</i>)
BOX OV 2	Diploma, 1784 (<i>Container 20; Reel 7</i>)

Oversize, 1784-1813

Container

Contents

BOX OV 3

Petition, Thornton et al. to Joseph Lewis, 1813 (*Container 20; Reel 7*)