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**

**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

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

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.


**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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BOX 1-7 REEL 1-4</strong></td>
<td>Correspondence and Other Material, 1741-1858</td>
<td>Correspondence, invitations, envelopes, photographs, clippings and other printed matter, and miscellaneous material. Arranged chronologically in bound volumes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BOX 8-17 REEL 4-6</strong></td>
<td>Writings, 1793-1829</td>
<td>Published and unpublished writings. Arranged by subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BOX 18-20 REEL 7</strong></td>
<td>Miscellany, 1777-1865</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BOX 21 not filmed</strong></td>
<td>Addition, 1810-1812</td>
<td>A letter and a pamphlet. Arranged alphabetically by type of material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BOX OV 1-OV 3 REEL 2, 7</strong></td>
<td>Oversize, 1784-1813</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Container List

Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 15,714

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 [See also Oversize](#) |
| 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 | *Cadmus: or, a Treatise on the Elements of the Written Language*, 1793-1802, undated *For additional material see Container 18 same heading; Reel 7* |
| BOX 12 REEL 5 | *Julia*, undated |
| BOX 13 REEL 5 | *Lucy*, 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  
*Cadmus: or, a Treatise on the Elements of the Written Language*, 1793  
*The Life of Dr. William Thornton*, undated  
Notebook, undated  
Diaries, 1777-1782 |
| BOX 19 REEL 7 | Notebook, circa 1783  
Commission, 1784 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **BOX 20 REEL 7** | Notebook, 1786  
Commission, 1794 *See also Oversize*  
Almanac, 1795  
Bankbook, 1850  
*Boston Investigator*, 1838  
Commission, 1802 *See also Oversize*  
Diploma, 1784 *See also Oversize*  
Expense books, 1795  
*Federal Republican*, 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)  
*La Grece*, 1825  
*National Journal*, 1829, June 17  
*Pennsylvania Packet*, 1790  
Printed matter, including clippings relating to George Washington memorial, 1799-1862, undated  
(2 folders)  
Washington assemblies, 1842, 1849  
(2 folders)  
*Washington Gazette*, 1821  
Petition, Thornton et al., to Joseph Lewis, 1813 *See also Oversize*  
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 (*Container 4; Reel 2*)  
Miscellany  
Commission, 1794 (*Container 19; Reel 7*)  
Commission, 1802 (*Container 20; Reel 7*) |
<p>| <strong>BOX OV 2</strong> | Diploma, 1784 (<em>Container 20; Reel 7</em>) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOX OV 3</td>
<td>Petition, Thornton et al. to Joseph Lewis, 1813 ([Container 20: Reel 7)](Container 20: Reel 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>