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

Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
2002

Contact information: http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact

Catalog Record: https://lccn.loc.gov/mm81046110

Additional search options available at: https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms007003

Prepared by Allan Teichroew
Revised by John R. Monagle

Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress Manuscript Division, 2007
Revised 2010 April
Collection Summary

Title: William Wirt Papers
Span Dates: 1802-1858
Bulk Dates: (bulk 1802-1834)
ID No.: MSS46110
Creator: Wirt, William, 1772-1834
Extent: 1,800 items
Extent: 9 containers plus 1 oversize
Extent: 2.2 linear feet
Extent: 4 microfilm reels
Language: Collection material in English
Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
LC Catalog record: https://lccn.loc.gov/mm81046110
Summary: Lawyer, politician, U. S. attorney general, and biographer. Correspondence, writings, and printed matter pertaining to Wirt's family and career as a lawyer, politician, and author.

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.
Biddle, Nicholas, 1786-1844--Correspondence.
Burr, Aaron, 1756-1836--Trials, litigation, etc.
Cabell, William H., 1772-1853--Correspondence.
Calhoun, John C. (John Caldwell), 1782-1850--Correspondence.
Carr, Dabney, 1773-1837--Correspondence.
Gamble, Robert, 1754-1810--Correspondence.
Gilmer, Peachy R. (Peachy Ridgeway), 1779-1836--Correspondence.
Goldsborough, Louis Malesherbes, 1805-1877.
Henry, Patrick, 1736-1799.
Jefferson, Thomas, 1743-1826--Correspondence.
Madison, James, 1751-1836--Correspondence.
Monroe, James, 1758-1831--Correspondence.
Phelps, Abner, 1779-1873--Correspondence.
Rush, Richard, 1780-1859--Correspondence.
Wallace, James--Correspondence.
Webster, James--Correspondence.
Werth family--Correspondence.
Williams, Lewis, 1786-1842--Correspondence.
Wirt, William, 1772-1834.

Organizations
Antimasonic Party.

Subjects
Attorneys general--United States.
Death.
Diseases.
Elections--United States--1832.
Germans--Florida.
Law--United States.
Law--Virginia--Richmond.
Piety.
Public prosecutors--Virginia--Richmond.
Slaveholders.
Slavery.

Places
Baltimore (Md.)--Social life and customs.
Germany--Emigration and immigration.
Maryland--Social life and customs.
Monticello (Fla.)--History.
Richmond (Va.)--Social life and customs.
Southern States--Social life and customs.
Virginia--Social life and customs.
Washington (D.C.)--Social life and customs.

Occupations
Biographers.
Lawyers.

Provenance
The papers of William Wirt, lawyer, politician, United States attorney general, and biographer, were obtained through gift and purchase from various individuals, principally Alexander Randall and James F. Meegan, between 1909 and 1957.

Processing History
The papers of William Wirt were processed and microfilmed in 1983. Bound volumes of correspondence and other papers were reprocessed in 2002, at which time the items were removed from the volumes and rehoused in folders, but filed in the exact order of their previous arrangement in the volumes.

Related Materials
The Maryland Historical Society houses a larger body of William Wirt papers which have been reproduced on microfilm and are available for use at the Library of Congress.

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

Access and Restrictions
The papers of William Wirt 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 these papers is available on four reels for purchase from the Library's Photoduplication Service subject to the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.). This microfilm edition may also be requested on
Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or reel number, William Wirt 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>1772, Nov. 8</td>
<td>Born, Bladensburg, Md.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>Admitted to Virginia bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>Married Mildred Gilmer (died 1799)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>Moved to Richmond, Va.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counsel for James Thomson Callender in alien and sedition trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elected clerk of Virginia House of Delegates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>Moved to Williamsburg, Va.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married Elizabeth Gamble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1803</td>
<td>Published <em>The Letters of the British Spy</em> in the <em>Virginia Argus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>Prosecutor in Aaron Burr case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1808</td>
<td>Returned to Richmond, Va.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elected to Virginia House of Delegates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>Began series of essays under the title <em>The Old Bachelor</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>Publication of <em>Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry</em> (Philadelphia: James Webster. 427 pp.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1817-1829</td>
<td>U. S. attorney general</td>
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<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>Moved to Baltimore, Md.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>Presidential nominee of the Anti-Masonic party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832-1833</td>
<td>Engaged in effort to establish colony of German immigrants in Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834, Feb. 18</td>
<td>Died, Washington, D. C.</td>
</tr>
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Scope and Content Note

The papers of William Wirt span the years 1802 to 1858, with the bulk of the items concentrated in the period 1802 to 1834. The collection consists of family and personal letters, professional or business correspondence, and the manuscript of Wirt’s biography of Patrick Henry. Scattered throughout the papers are clippings, reminiscences, transcribed writings and poetry, and children’s essays. One set of correspondence covering the years 1831-1832 focuses solely on Wirt’s decision to run for president on the Anti-Masonic party ticket against Andrew Jackson. An assortment of material also postdates Wirt’s death in 1834, including papers from survivors and descendants consisting mostly of letters of condolence and other family matters.

The main part of the correspondence treats the relationship between Wirt and his children. He had twelve by his second wife, Elizabeth Gamble, nine of whom survived to adolescence or adulthood. Their letters reflect the values of a Southern slaveholding family during a period of rapid social and political change and includes references to childhood rituals of amusement and learning and elaborate descriptions of Wirt family Christmases. Other subjects include Christian piety, social life in Richmond, Virginia, Washington, D. C., and Baltimore, and the Wirt family’s near continual grappling with illness and death.

Besides immediate family members, the most frequent correspondent in these papers is Peachy Gilmer of Henry County, Virginia. A relative through Wirt’s first wife, Mildred Gilmer of “Pen Park,” Peachy Gilmer was a lifelong friend whose
letters from Wirt show the latter’s developing views over three decades. The correspondence is personal and family oriented and rather candid. A July 1807 letter from Richmond includes Wirt’s observations of the Aaron Burr trial in which he was counsel for the prosecution. Wirt and Gilmer also discussed their private financial affairs, especially in their earlier correspondence when both expressed interest in moving to Kentucky. In the 1830s after his retirement as attorney general of the United States, Wirt organized a plan to settle German farmers on an agricultural tract near Monticello, Florida. His partner and agent was Louis M. Goldsborough, a son-in-law and naval officer whose communications from the scene document the unfolding and eventual failure of the colonization effort.

Other important topics include Wirt’s The Letters of the British Spy published in 1803, reactions of advance readers to the manuscript of his biography of Patrick Henry, and legal work conducted by Wirt while United States attorney for the District of Richmond in 1816 and later, from 1817 to 1829, while attorney general.

Correspondents in addition to those already mentioned include Nicholas Biddle, William H. Cabell, John C. Calhoun, Dabney Carr, Robert Gamble, Abner Phelps, Richard Rush, James Wallace, James Webster, and Lewis Williams. There are also copies of letters to presidents John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe.

**Arrangement of the Papers**

This collection is arranged alphabetically by type of material and chronologically therein.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOX 1 REEL 1</td>
<td>Correspondence and other papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 1 REEL 1</td>
<td>Family and personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 1 REEL 1</td>
<td>1802, Apr. 8-1825, May 22 (10 folders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 2 REEL 1</td>
<td>1825, May 23-1827, Nov. 17 (4 folders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 3 REEL 2</td>
<td>1825, Nov. 18-1830, Feb. 3 (6 folders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 4 REEL 2</td>
<td>1830, Feb. 4-1833, Feb. 18 (6 folders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 5 REEL 3</td>
<td>1833, Feb. 19-1858, June 2 (5 folders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 6 REEL 3</td>
<td>Undated (4 folders)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 7 REEL 3</td>
<td>Presidential campaign of 1832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 7 REEL 3</td>
<td>Miscellany, 1831-1832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 8 REEL 4</td>
<td>Professional and business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX 8 REEL 4</td>
<td>Vol. 1, 1816, May 10-1832, July 26</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOX 9 REEL 4</td>
<td>Vol. 2, 1816, June 24-1832, June 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOX OV 1 REEL 4</td>
<td>Writings (Oversize)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOX OV 1 REEL 4</td>
<td><em>The Life of Patrick Henry</em>, circa 1815</td>
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