

William Wirt 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/mm81046110>

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

Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

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Collection Summary

Title: William Wirt Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1802-1858

Bulk Dates: 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://lcn.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 Ridgway), 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.

Werth family.

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.

Acquisition Information

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 by Allan Teichroew and microfilmed in 1983. Bound volumes of correspondence and other papers were reprocessed in 2002 by John R. Monagle, 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. The finding aid was updated in 2023 by Maria Farmer as part of a division-wide remediation project by the Inclusive Description Working Group.

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 interlibrary loan through the Library's Loan Division. A copy of the 1983 finding aid is available on reel one of the microfilm edition.

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

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

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 family that enslaved people 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.

Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 1 REEL 1	Correspondence and other papers
BOX 1 REEL 1	Family and personal
BOX 1 REEL 1	1802, Apr. 8-1825, May 22 (10 folders)
BOX 2 REEL 1	1825, May 23-1827, Nov. 17 (4 folders)
BOX 3 REEL 2	1825, Nov.18-1830, Feb. 3 (6 folders)
BOX 4 REEL 2	1830, Feb. 4-1833, Feb. 18 (6 folders)
BOX 5 REEL 3	1833, Feb. 19-1858, June 2 (5 folders)
BOX 6 REEL 3	Undated (4 folders)
BOX 7 REEL 3	Presidential campaign of 1832
BOX 7 REEL 3	Miscellany, 1831-1832
BOX 8 REEL 4	Professional and business
BOX 8 REEL 4	Vol. 1, 1816, May 10-1832, July 26
BOX 9 REEL 4	Vol. 2, 1816, June 24-1832, June 4
BOX OV 1 REEL 4	Writings (Oversize)
BOX OV 1 REEL 4	<i>The Life of Patrick Henry</i> , circa 1815