

James Gillespie Birney Papers
A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress



Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
2024

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

Catalog Record: <https://lcn.loc.gov/mm79012799>

Additional search options available at: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms008026>

Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress Manuscript Division, 2008
Revised 2024 January

Collection Summary

Title: James Gillespie Birney Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1830-circa 1895

Bulk Dates: 1830-1850

ID No.: MSS12799

Creator: Birney, James Gillespie, 1792-1857

Extent: 22 items

Extent: 1 container

Extent: 0.2 linear feet

Extent: 1 microfilm reel

Language: Collection material in English

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

LC Catalog record: <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm79012799>

Summary: Abolitionist and editor. Correspondence, diaries, a notebook, and newspaper clippings primarily concerning Birney's participation in the antislavery movement.

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

Birney, James Gillespie, 1792-1857.

Birney, William, 1819-1907. William Birney papers.

Holley, Myron, 1779-1841--Correspondence.

Lundy, Benjamin, 1789-1839.

Mudge, B. F. (Benjamin Franklin), 1817-1879--Correspondence.

Smith, Gerrit, 1797-1874--Correspondence.

Smith, Gerrit, 1797-1874.

Weld, Theodore Dwight, 1803-1895--Correspondence.

Weld, Theodore Dwight, 1803-1895.

Organizations

American Colonization Society.

Liberty Party (U.S. : 1840-1848)

Subjects

Abolitionists.

African Americans--Colonization--Africa.

Antislavery movements.

Slavery.

Occupations

Abolitionists.

Editors.

Acquisition Information

The papers of James Gillespie Birney, abolitionist and editor, were deposited in the Library of Congress by Dion S. Birney in 1932. The deposit was converted to a gift in 1958.

Processing History

The papers of James Gillespie Birney were arranged and described in 1981 by Jacqueline Goggin. The collection was expanded and revised by Michael McElderry in 1986 and 1998, and additional revisions were made to the finding aid in 2008. The finding aid was updated in 2024 by Maria Farmer as part of a division-wide remediation project by the Inclusive Description Working Group.

Transfers

The "Liberty's Advocate" (Amesbury and Salisbury, Mass.; 21 Oct. 1843, no. 5) has been transferred to the Rare Books and Special Collections Division where they are identified as part of the James Gillespie Birney Papers.

Copyright Status

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

Access and Restrictions

The papers of James Gillespie Birney 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 one reel. 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 number, James Gillespie Birney Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

Date	Event
1792, Feb. 4	Born, Danville, Ky.
1810	Graduated, College of New Jersey (Princeton University), Princeton, N.J.
1814	Read law in office of Alexander J. Dallas, Philadelphia, Pa. Admitted to bar Began law practice in Danville, Ky.
1816	Married Agatha McDowell (died 1839) Elected to Kentucky legislature
1818	Moved to Alabama
1819	Elected representative to first General Assembly of Alabama
1827	Drafted legislation passed by the General Assembly of Alabama prohibiting the importation of enslaved Africans
1829	Bill concerning the importation of enslaved people repealed by the General Assembly of Alabama

1832	Reintroduced legislation in the general assembly of Alabama prohibiting the importation of enslaved Africans Became agent for the American Colonization Society, traveling and lecturing in the South to promote migration of African Americans to the continent of Africa Returned to Kentucky
1834	Emancipated his enslaved workers
1835	Formed Kentucky Anti-Slavery Society
1836	Moved to Ohio and began to publish the <i>Philanthropist</i> , an antislavery newspaper
1837	Elected executive secretary, American Anti-Slavery Society Moved to New York
1840	Vice president, World's Anti-Slavery Convention
1840, 1844	Presidential candidate for the Liberty Party
1841	Married Elizabeth Potts Fitzhugh
1852	Published <i>Examination of the Decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, in the Case of Strader, Gorman and Armstrong vs. Christopher Graham, Delivered at Its December Term, 1850: Concluding with an Address to the Free Colored People, Advising them to Remove to Liberia</i> . Cincinnati: Truman & Spofford
1857, Nov. 25	Died, Perth Amboy, N.J.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of James Gillespie Birney (1792-1857) span the years 1830-circa 1895, with the bulk of the material concentrated in the period 1830-1850. They contain four types of material arranged in the following order: diaries, a notebook, correspondence, and newspaper clippings.

The diaries, consisting of three volumes, 1830-1850, were written by Birney while he traveled throughout the United States and abroad on antislavery lecture tours. They describe his travels on behalf of the abolitionist movement; his association with abolitionist leaders, such as Benjamin Lundy, Gerrit Smith, and Theodore Weld; his opposition to the followers of William Lloyd Garrison, who believed that slavery could not be abolished through legal and constitutional means; and his support for the colonization of African Americans in Africa and for the American Colonization Society.

The notebook, circa 1895, may have been written by Birney's son, William, and contains biographical information on his father's activities as an abolitionist.

The correspondence, 1834-1844, contains mainly letters James Birney wrote to Gerrit Smith and Theodore Weld discussing antislavery activities. Included are a letter of 1844 to B. F. Mudge regarding the Liberty party's convention in Lynn, Massachusetts, and a photocopy of an 1839 letter to Myron Holley describing political agitation to end slavery.

The newspaper clippings consist of an obituary of Benjamin Lundy and a letter D. D. Barnard wrote to the United States House of Representatives in 1842 regarding a resolution of censure proposed by Congressman Joshua Giddings.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged by type of material.

Container List

Available on microfilm. Shelf no. 19,543

Container	Contents
BOX 1 REEL 1	Diaries
BOX 1 REEL 1	1830, Aug 31-Oct. 1
BOX 1 REEL 1	1834, Sept.-Oct.
BOX 1 REEL 1	1840-1842, 1845, 1850
BOX 1 REEL 1	Notebook, probably by William Birney for a biography of his father, circa 1895
BOX 1 REEL 1	Correspondence
BOX 1 REEL 1	1834
BOX 1 REEL 1	1835, 1844
BOX 1 REEL 1	1839, Dec., photocopy
BOX 1 REEL 1	Newspaper clippings, 1839, 1842