

Elizur Wright Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress

Prepared by Karen Stuart



Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

Washington, D.C.

2010

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

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Collection Summary

Title: Elizur Wright Papers

Span Dates: 1793-1935

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1830-1885)

ID No.: MSS46607

Creator: Wright, Elizur, 1804-1885

Extent: 5,300 items ; 29 containers ; 8 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

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

Abstract: Reformer, publisher, and actuary. Correspondence, manuscript and typewritten transcripts of writings, legal and financial papers, scrapbooks, clippings, printed material, photographs, and other papers relating chiefly to Wright's involvement in the antislavery movement and to his work as an actuary and as an author and translator.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

People

Abbot, Francis Ellingwood, 1836-1903--Correspondence.
Alcott, Louisa May, 1832-1888--Correspondence.
Alcott, May, 1840-1879--Correspondence.
Bennett, De Robigne Mortimer, 1818-1882--Correspondence.
Birney, Catherine H.--Correspondence.
Birney, James Gillespie, 1792-1857--Correspondence.
Birney, William, 1819-1907--Correspondence.
Blackwell, Henry Browne, 1825-1909--Correspondence.
Burleigh, William Henry, 1812-1871--Correspondence.
Chase, Salmon P. (Salmon Portland), 1808-1873--Correspondence.
Dana, Charles A. (Charles Anderson), 1819-1897--Correspondence.
Danforth, Joshua N. (Joshua Noble) 1798-1861--Correspondence.
Garrison, William Lloyd, 1805-1879--Correspondence.
Greeley, Horace, 1811-1872--Correspondence.
Green, Beriah, 1795-1874--Correspondence.
Holley, Sallie, 1818-1893--Correspondence.
Ingersoll, Robert Green, 1833-1899--Correspondence.
Jocelyn, Simeon Smith, 1799-1879--Correspondence.
Phelps, Amos A. (Amos Augustus), 1805-1847--Correspondence.
Phillips, Wendell, 1811-1884--Correspondence.
Rawson, Albert L. (Albert Leighton), 1829-1902--Correspondence.
Smith, Gerrit, 1797-1874--Correspondence.
Stanton, Henry B. (Henry Brewster), 1805-1887--Correspondence.
Tappan, Lewis, 1788-1873--Correspondence.
Weld, Theodore Dwight, 1803-1895--Correspondence.
Whittier, John Greenleaf, 1807-1892--Correspondence.
Wright family--Correspondence.
Wright family.
Wright, Elizur, 1804-1885.

Organizations

American Anti-Slavery Society.
Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.
National Liberal League.

Subjects

Antislavery movements.
Conservation of natural resources.
Free thought.
Freemasonry.
Insurance--Mathematics.
Religion.
Slavery--United States.
Social problems.
Temperance.
Tobacco use.

Places

United States--Politics and government--19th century.

Titles

Massachusetts abolitionist.
Quarterly anti-slavery magazine.

Occupations

Actuaries.
Publishers.
Reformers.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of Elizur Wright, reformer, publisher, and actuary, were given to the Library of Congress by the estate of Wilhelmine Gerber Wright and by Margaret Odlin Green (Mrs. Charles Green), in 1934. An addition was given by Diana Wright in 1989.

Processing History

The collection was processed in 1990. The finding aid was revised in 2010.

Copyright Status

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

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Elizur Wright 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.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Elizur Wright Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1804, Feb. 12	Born, South Canaan, Conn.
1810	Moved to Tallmadge, Summit Co., Ohio

1826	A.B., Yale College, New Haven, Conn.
1826-1828	Teacher, Lawrence Academy, Groton, Conn.
1829	Married Susan Clark
1829-1833	Professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, Western College, Reserve Hudson, Ohio
1833	Moved to New York, N.Y.
1833-1839	Founding member and corresponding secretary, American Anti-Slavery Society
1834-1835	Editor, <i>Human Rights</i>
1835-1837	Editor, <i>Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine</i>
1838	Moved to Boston, Mass.; joined Gerrit Smith, James G. Birney, and others in forming the Liberty Party
1838-1839	Editor, <i>Massachusetts Abolitionist</i>
1841	Published translation, <i>The Fables of La Fontaine</i>
1846	Editor, <i>Chronotype</i> (later <i>Commonwealth</i>)
1853	Published <i>Life Insurance Valuation Tables</i>
1858-1866	Appointed insurance commissioner, Massachusetts
1866-1885	Consulting actuary
1869	Patented the “arithmeter,” a calculating machine
1879	President, National Liberal League
1882	Published <i>The Life of Myron Holley</i>
1883	President, Middlesex Fells Association
1885, Nov. 21	Died, Medford, Mass.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Elizur Wright (1804-1885) span the years 1793-1935, with the bulk of the material falling between 1830-1885. The collection consists principally of correspondence, but also includes writings, scrapbooks, press clippings, and other material by and about Elizur Wright and Wright family members. The papers are organized into the following series: [Correspondence](#), [Writings](#), and [Miscellany](#).

The earliest papers in the collection, 1793-1829, pertain to Wright’s parents, Elizur (1762-1847) and Clarissa Richards Wright, their neighbors in Tallmadge, Ohio, and older or more distant relatives. Elizur Wright, Sr., was involved with the Reverend William Hanford in the founding of Western Reserve College, and held one of its first professorships. From

1822-1826, Elizur Wright, Jr., was a student at Yale College; his letters home describe his education and social life, and his early career as a schoolmaster in the Union and Lawrence academies in nearby Groton, Connecticut. Wright's 1829 letters to Susan Clark (1810-1875), his former pupil, discuss their forthcoming marriage.

Late in 1829, Wright moved with his young wife to Hudson, Ohio to accept an appointment as professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at Western Reserve College. There, with Beriah Green and other members of the faculty, he formed the Western Reserve College Anti-Slavery Society. Debate over the abolition movement ultimately split the faculty and prompted Wright's removal to New York. He became active in the American Anti-Slavery Society, edited its *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, and worked to raise funds, promote its lectures, and plan its 1833 Philadelphia meeting. Wright also edited the publications *Human Rights* and the *Emancipator*, and was in active communication with other abolition societies and publications. Wright's correspondence in the 1830s reflects division within abolitionist ranks over the issues of African colonization and women's role in the anti-slavery movement. Letters from Wright's sister Lucy discuss the school she operated for the education and training of freed blacks in Cincinnati. Family matters also predominate, with the birth in 1830 of the first of Wright's eighteen children. His letters to Beriah Green discuss child rearing practices in great detail.

As ideological differences continued to divided abolitionist ranks in the 1840s, Wright left New York and the *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine* to edit the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's *Massachusetts Abolitionist*. Presidential politics and the annexation of Texas are frequently discussed in the correspondence. Wright's growing family and financial obligations led to a variety of money-making schemes, none very successful. He translated and published an edition of La Fontaine's fables, then traveled the northeastern United States from Massachusetts to the District of Columbia to promote and sell the volume, visiting anti-slavery colleagues along the way. An assignment to attend an 1844 anti-slavery conference in England as a correspondent provided the opportunity to pursue both interests. He promoted an invention, the rotary knitting loom, and "temperance life insurance," offered to abstainers from alcohol and tobacco, through the New England Mutual Life Insurance Company, receiving written inquiries from potential agents and customers. Wright also published a weekly paper, the *Chronotype*. Relative Hannah Robie's September 6, 1843 letter describes her visit to the household of Amos Bronson Alcott.

Wright's anti-slavery activities continued in the 1850s (he was arrested in 1851 on a charge of aiding a fugitive slave), but continuing financial difficulties and his varied interests encouraged him to pursue other enterprises. He patented, and worked to promote, a "stop-cock" water valve. Continuing to publish the *Chronotype*, Wright used its pages and his wide correspondence to advocate spelling reforms and an end to dishonest and unsound practices in the life insurance industry. On commission from the New England Mutual Life Insurance Company, Wright prepared actuarial tables that would enable insurers to ascertain their policies' current value and the amount of reserves necessary to cover them. Wright later published his tables, and lobbied for protective legislation to require all insurers to maintain adequate reserves. This led, in turn, to his appointment as Massachusetts insurance commissioner. Family letters of the period discuss Wright's increasingly atheistic views and his sister Clarissa Wright Burrell's move to California.

Wright's letters of the early 1860s are mostly concerned with his insurance and actuarial enterprises, and make only passing reference to the Civil War. Wright invented and patented the "arithmeter," a calculating machine, and was appointed to the Massachusetts Commission on the Hours of Labor. Letters to and from Salmon P. Chase discuss Reconstruction laws and the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution. Family letters discuss the marriages of Wright's son John and daughter Mary, and, with the birth of grandchildren, child rearing practices.

Wright's correspondence in the 1870s reflects his involvement in the National Liberal League; the "free thought" movement, which advocated strict separation of church and state, full civil rights for all citizens, and various educational and social reforms; and his writings in the publication *The Index*. Wright supported woman suffrage but opposed its linkage with "free love," according to one letter. He opposed the 1873 Comstock law. As an "elder statesman" of the reform movement, Wright received requests for historical information about the founding of Western Reserve College, the anti-slavery movement, and his personal reminiscences. The family correspondence includes letters of condolence on the death of Susan Clark Wright.

In the last years of Wright's life, his correspondence focused on activities of the National Liberal League, his biography of Myron Holley, and his involvement in the Middlesex Fells Association, a group formed to promote the preservation of a tract of forest land near Boston. He corresponded frequently with a Mrs. Lawrence, author of *Tobacco*, a tract criticizing the habit. The family correspondence includes letters of condolence received after Wright's death in 1885.

The collection's later correspondence chiefly concerns Ellen Wright's continuation of her father's efforts to promote conservation of the Middlesex Fells, and Walter C. Wright's insurance enterprises. Undated material includes miscellaneous fragments, usually from Wright or family members.

Correspondents include Wright family members and Francis Ellingwood Abbot, Louisa May Alcott, May Alcott, De Robigne Mortimer Bennett, Catherine H. Birney, James Gillespie Birney, William Birney, Henry Browne Blackwell, William Henry Burleigh, Salmon P. Chase, Charles A. Dana, Joshua N. Danforth, William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, Beriah Green, Sallie Holley, Robert Green Ingersoll, Simeon Smith Jocelyn, Amos A. Phelps, Wendell Phillips, Albert L. Rawson, Gerrit Smith, Henry B. Stanton, Lewis Tappan, Theodore Dwight Weld, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in three series:

- [Correspondence, 1793-1922](#)
- [Writings, circa 1820-1887](#)
- [Miscellany, 1801-1935](#)

Description of Series

<i>Container</i>	<i>Series</i>
BOX 1-22	<u>Correspondence, 1793-1922</u> Principally letters written or received by Elizur Wright, Jr. Organized in two sets, bound and unbound, and therein chronologically.
BOX 23-26	<u>Writings, circa 1820-1887</u> Bound volumes of typed transcriptions compiling Wright's shorter essays on public affairs, religion, and life insurance, followed by manuscript notes and drafts pertaining to other works. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 26-29	<u>Miscellany, 1801-1935</u> Legal and financial papers, prints and photographs, clippings and printed matter, and scrapbooks. Organized by type of material and therein chronologically.

Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1-22	Correspondence, 1793-1922 Principally letters written or received by Elizur Wright, Jr. Organized in two sets, bound and unbound, and therein chronologically.
BOX 1	Bound
BOX 1	1817, July 1-1829, Feb. 26
BOX 2	1829, Mar. 5-1835
BOX 3	1838, Jan. 13-1837, June 30; 1839
BOX 4	1837, July 8-1838, Mar. 5; 1839
BOX 5	1838, Mar. 6-1839, June 5
BOX 6	1839, June 14-1841, Jan. 21
BOX 7	1841, Jan. 26-1842, Sept. 7
BOX 8	1842, Sept. 7-1844, June 29
BOX 9	1844, July 1-1846, Jan. 14
BOX 10	1846, Jan. 22-1852, May 13
BOX 11	1853, Jan. 7-1861, Nov. 26
BOX 12	1861, Dec. 30-1868, Jan. 22
BOX 13	1868, Feb. 21-1872, Dec. 26
BOX 14	1872, Dec. 27, 1877, Nov. 25
BOX 15	1877, Dec. 8-1879, Aug. 18
BOX 16	1879, Aug. 19-1880, Aug. 15
BOX 17	1880, Aug. 21-1882, Aug. 27
BOX 18	1882, Sept. 1-1885, Oct. 16
BOX 19	1885, Oct. 17-1895, Dec 25, undated
BOX 20	Unbound
BOX 20	1793-1869 (10 folders)
BOX 21	1870-1874 (7 folders)
BOX 22	1875-1922, undated (11 folders)
BOX 23-26	Writings, circa 1820-1887 Bound volumes of typed transcriptions compiling Wright's shorter essays on public affairs, religion, and life insurance, followed by manuscript notes and drafts pertaining to other works. Arranged chronologically.
BOX 23	Public affairs, 1832-1876
BOX 23	Religion, 1858-1885
BOX 24	Life insurance
BOX 24	1859-1874
BOX 24	1875-1886

Writings, circa 1820-1887

Container

Contents

BOX 24	Miscellaneous and dramatic writings, 1859-1884, undated
BOX 25	Copybook, circa 1820
BOX 25	Clark, Susan, school composition book, 1824
BOX 25	Lecture notes, Western Reserve College, Hudson, Ohio, 1831, undated
BOX 25	Auxiliaries to the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836-1837
BOX 25	<i>The Fables of La Fontaine</i> , circa 1839
BOX 25	Anti-Slavery, 1840, undated
BOX 25	Inventions, rotary knitting loom, circa 1840
BOX 25	<i>A Curiosity of Law</i> , 1866
BOX 25	<i>The Cash and Part Note Premium Systems of Life Insurance</i> , 1868
BOX 25	Northern Pacific Railroad, 1874
BOX 26	Holley, Myron, biography, circa 1880
BOX 26	Biographical material, 1885, undated
BOX 26	"Song for the Million and Other Poems by Father," 1887
BOX 26	Free thought, undated
BOX 26	Politics, undated
BOX 26	Miscellaneous, circa 1830-1873, undated
BOX 26-29	Miscellany, 1801-1935 Legal and financial papers, prints and photographs, clippings and printed matter, and scrapbooks. Organized by type of material and therein chronologically.
BOX 26	Receipted bill, Josiah Clark, 1801
BOX 26	Deeds, 1827-1831
BOX 26	Commissions, 1858; 1864
BOX 26	Printed matter, 1867-1906, undated
BOX 26	Prints and photographs, circa 1870-1895
BOX 26	Estate papers, 1886-1889
BOX 26	Clippings
BOX 26	Unbound, circa 1885-1935
BOX 27	Bound, 1852-1884
BOX 28	Scrapbooks
BOX 28	1842-1885
BOX 28	circa 1860-1880
BOX 28	1883-1900
BOX 29	Cash receipts ledger, 1828-1832, 1879