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WINCHESTER, JAMES (1752-1856)
PAPERS, 1787-1953

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INTRODUCTION

These papers for the years 1787-1953, relating primarily to the career and activities of General James Winchester, U.S. Army, were given to the Tennessee Historical Society by Mr. George Wynne, Castalian Springs, Tennessee.

The materials in this collection measure 1.68 linear feet. There are no restrictions on the materials.

Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the James Winchester Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The papers of General James Winchester, numbering approximately 1,100 items and two volumes, contain accounts (bills, notes, receipts), personal and military; correspondence; land records including claims, records, deeds, grants, papers dealing with Memphis land surveys and commissions, court minutes, summonses, etc.

Correspondence, mainly James Winchester's incoming (1793-1825) and outgoing (1796-1826), comprises about half the collection. In addition to the military correspondence, a great portion deals with land speculation. The largest number of letters from any one man to Winchester is that of Judge John Overton, who, apart from being Winchester's confidant and friend, was his partner in land dealings. There are 116 pieces of correspondence with Overton, and these are primarily on the subject of Memphis lands as Winchester, Overton, and Andrew Jackson were extensively involved in the establishment and early growth of the community.

There are three letters and a fragment of another from Andrew Jackson: one regarding Memphis, one about running the U.S. Chickasaw boundary line (near the vicinity of Memphis), and one in regard to supplies during the War of 1812, when Jackson was commanding at New Orleans and Winchester at Mobile. These letters, all of which are originals, were written to Winchester, and do not appear in Bassett's Correspondence of Andrew Jackson.

Although the collection spans the period 1787-1953, there is little about Winchester and his affairs after his death in 1826. Most material falls in the period 1812-1815, when he was General in the "Additional Army," which was called into national service for the War of 1812. The majority of this is correspondence dealing with his service (1) shortly before the War, (2) during the War in the Northwest campaign of 1812-13, including the Battle of the Raisin River, (3) as a prisoner of war at Quebec in 1813, and (4) after his return to command at Mobile in 1815. (Military correspondence has not been separated as "military papers," since the subject matter is often not so limited as the military only.)

Several letters deal with two interesting aspects of the War of 1812. One is the treatment of prisoners of war. In 1813 Winchester, as senior officer for the "parolees" at "Beauport," as well as later at "Fort Louis," had occasion to address Gen. Sir George Prevost; commissary of prisoners in charge of exchanging prisoners, Gen. John Mason; Maj. Gen. George Glasgow, in charge of Beauport prison near Quebec (where 46 prisoners were detained in 1813); and his assistant, Maj. R. Ross Lewin, as well as the American Secretary of State, James Monroe. In turn there is correspondence from Prevost, Glasgow, and other prison authorities, Col. Edward Baynes, R. Ross Lewin, and Capt. Francis Kempt. Much later in 1815 there are three letters addressed to Mobile from John Hanes, Marshal of the Mississippi Territory, re the treatment of Indian prisoners.

The other aspect of the War well represented is that of intelligence activities on the Gulf Coast by agents James L. Armstrong, George Farragut, Capt. S.H. Garrard, Lt. P.H. Hobart, Maj. I.P. Kennedy, Benjamin Lanier, Capt. M. McKinsey, Thomas Powell, John Pritchard, and Maj. Russell. The reports of these men concern British troop and naval movements in the vicinities of Mobile, New Orleans, Pascagoula, Pensacola, and Savannah.

Among other prominent correspondents are U.S. Secretary of War John Armstrong, William G. Blount, Gov. Willie Blount, Adj. Gen. Robert Butler, John C. Calhoun,

George W. Campbell, William Carroll, Charles Cassedy, Col. George Colbert, Gen. Joseph Desha, Col. John Donelson (1755-1830), John R. Eaton, Robert C. Foster, Agent George S. Gaines, Felix Grundy, Gen. William H. Harrison, Gov. Alvin Hawkins, Capt. William Lauderdale, Maj. Gen. William McIntosh, Joseph McMinn, George Madison, Gov. Matteo Gonzales Manrique of Pensacola, Col. William Martin, Gideon J. Pillow, Archibald Roane, James Robertson, and Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Taylor.

Family correspondence is from James Winchester's three brothers – David, Stephen, and William, and from two sons – Marcus Brutus and Valerius Publicola. Other children and relatives are not represented.

Two volumes contain General Winchester's outgoing correspondence from May to September 1812 in letterbooks. This is exclusively military correspondence and deals mainly with preparations for recruiting, equipping, and activating new troops. Communications are addressed to such persons as Brig. Gen. Thomas H. Cushing; U.S. Secretary of War, William Eustis; Maj. Edmund P. Gaines; Gen. William H. Harrison; and Governor of Kentucky, Charles Scott. In the same letterbook are letters concerned with the conduct of Winchester in the Northwest campaign. Besides his own writing, Winchester included extracts of letters from Kentucky Governor George Madison; Col. Joshua Barbee; Capt. William Garrard; General Robert M. Gano; Maj. Joseph Eve; Col. William Lewis; Capt. Sam G. Hopkins; Capt. R. Bledsoe; Col. Richard Davenport; Capt. Thomas Eastland; Adj. Gen. A.T. Nicholl; Chaplain Samuel Shannon; Maj. John Arnold; Chaplain James Suggett; Gov. of Kentucky, Isaac Shelby; Gen. William H. Harrison; U.S. Senator, Waller Taylor; Gen. Thomas Bodley, and Gov. Finley. Also in these letterbooks is a philosophy of history written by Charles Cassedy.

An addition to these papers consists of a surveyor's notebook, containing diary entries and correspondence, which apparently belonged to James Winchester. The volume concerns three surveys made in Tennessee in 1787 and 1800 to determine the boundaries between the Indian lands and those belonging to the United States Government. In addition to Winchester, other prominent men mentioned are Thomas Butler, David Campbell (1753-1832), Moses Fisk, Andrew Pickens, and Benjamin Hawkins, Indian agent for all tribes south of the Ohio.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

James Winchester

- 1752 Feb. 6 – born at “White Level,” estate of father, Carroll County, Maryland, near the present town of Westminster. Son of William (1710-1790) and Lydia (Richards) (1727-1809) Winchester.
- 1760-75 Educated by tutors.
- 1776 July-Dec. – enlisted and served in 2nd Maryland Battalion “the Flying Camp” for service in the Revolutionary War; May 1776, appointed 2nd lieutenant in this battalion.
- 1777 Aug. 22 – was wounded and taken prisoner, Staten Island, New York. Remained prisoner for a year before being exchanged.
- 1778 May 27 – appointed 1st lieutenant, 2nd Maryland Battalion.
- 1780 May 12 – captured at Charleston, South Carolina; released Dec. 22, 1780.
- 1781 June 1 – transferred to 3rd Maryland Battalion; Feb. 9, 1782, commissioned a captain; with his brother, George, a lieutenant, fought through the southern campaign under General Nathaniel Greene; is said to have been present at the siege of Yorktown and at the surrender of Gen. Cornwallis; served until Nov. 1785.
- 1785 At the close of the war James and brother, George, migrated to Tennessee; James Winchester, John Overton, and Andrew Jackson joined with others to purchase the Rice Grant; this was 5,000 acres on which the town of Memphis, Tennessee, was built. Thus he became one of the first proprietors of the town.
- James settled on Bledsoe’s Creek in Sumner County, Tennessee (then the Mero District of North Carolina), where he owned a large body of valuable property near the present town of Gallatin.
His war experience proved useful in repelling Indian attacks; directed scouts and spies, sometimes accompanying the troops.
- 1787 April – sat as a member of the first county court of Sumner County; was also in charge of a survey which fixed the southern boundary of Tennessee.
- 1788 Served in the North Carolina convention as captain, colonel, and brigadier-general of the Mero District.
- 1794 Was a member of the Territorial General Assembly.

- 1796 Tennessee was admitted to statehood, and James Winchester was elected senator and speaker of the first Tennessee State senate.
- ca. 1802 “Cragfont,” home of Winchester near Gallatin, Tennessee, completed.
- 1812 Mar. 27, appointed brigadier-general, U.S. Army at outbreak of the war with England (War of 1812) and placed in command of the Army of the Northwest, succeeding William Henry Harrison (substitution was unpopular with the troops, and Winchester was then 60 years of age and had not held a command for over ten years).
- 1813 Jan. 22, after defeating the British and Indian forces in several engagements and constructing Fort Winchester, his forces were surprised and defeated at the disastrous Battle of the River Raisin. Much of the army was killed or captured. Winchester, along with his son, Marcus Brutus (who was on his staff), was imprisoned in Quebec, Canada, for over a year.
- 1814 Exchanged and placed in command of Mobile District. Commanded American forces at Mobile during the time that it was under attack by the British in February.
- 1815 Mar. 31, resigned from the U.S. Army.
- 1816 Accused by Robert B. McAfee of gross negligence and military incapacity in the River Raisin campaign, 1812-13.
- 1818 Refused an official inquiry, Winchester published a defense of his conduct entitled *Historical Details*.
- 1819 Appointed commissioner to run the Chickasaw boundary line between Tennessee and Mississippi.
- 1819-26 Active in business ventures and land speculation. During this period much of his promotion of the town of Memphis, which resulted in his being dubbed the “founder” of the town, took place. His son, Marcus Brutus, had moved to Memphis and became the first mayor.
- 1826 July 26, died at his home, “Cragfont,” and is buried there. The county seat of Franklin County, Tennessee, was named in honor of James Winchester.

Sources:

1. Manuscripts in the possession of the Tennessee Historical Society and the Manuscript Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

2. Louis Farrell, *Descendants of William Manchester*, n.p., [1933].
3. Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1868.
4. Jay Guy Cisco, *Historic Sumner County, Tennessee, with genealogies of the Bledsoe, Cage and Douglas families, with genealogical notes of other Sumner County families*. Nashville: Folk-Keelin Printing Co., 1909.

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