

DENTON FAMILY PAPERS
1855-[1895-1930]-1988

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INTRODUCTION

The Denton Family Papers measure 2 cubic feet and span the years 1855 to 1988, with bulk dates ranging from 1895 to 1930. The unrestricted collection includes legal and business papers, correspondence, genealogical research findings concerning the Denton family in America and their British and French ancestors, photographs of family tombstones, a family notebook containing favorite songs and various clippings, and other items that reveal diverse aspects of the lives of John Savage Denton (1865-1939), his wife Hettie Farr Denton (1870-1949), and several other family members, including John Holland Denton and Mary Farr Denton Murray. When the papers arrived, they were in fair or poor condition, and required some conservation work. The papers were not organized in any way, and, in fact, were in some disarray, so they were rearranged according to document type and date. The collection can be located at II-L-1, top. Interested researchers may also want to consult *Denton, Joseph vs. Joseph Blake and John Cox*, Judgment 1789, Accession Number 89.135, located at VII-L-3) for further information on one member of the Denton family.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Savage Denton was a prominent Tennessean who worked for the General Auditing Office in Washington, D.C., during President Grover Cleveland's second administration in the early 1890s; he also served as secretary for the governor of Tennessee, Benton McMillin, at the turn of the century, and later as State Commissioner of Institutions for Governor Thomas Clarke Rye. His father, John Holland Denton, grew up on a farm in White County, practiced law in the 1850s, and was elected as a state senator in the district composed of White, Jackson, and Macon Counties in 1857-1858. He then served for the Confederacy as second lieutenant of the 16th regiment of the Tennessee Infantry Volunteers. He was later elected (in 1877) as joint representative from Putnam and White counties to the state legislature. Several of his ancestors, including Abraham Denton, had served the Revolutionary War. J. S. Denton's wife, H. F. Denton, worked in public office in Franklin, Tennessee, as the city marshal upon the death of her father in 1925. The couple bore one child, Mary Farr Denton, who married Frank Murray in 1924.

SCOPE & CONTENT

The Denton Family Papers, 1855-[1895-1930]-1988, are primarily comprised of items belonging to John Savage Denton and his family, although a good part of the collection is genealogical research findings concerning the Denton family. Apart from the genealogical papers, some of the items include legal and business papers, correspondence, newspaper clippings, funeral and wedding notices, business accounts, and a notebook containing songs, poems, music programs, and other items of special importance to the family. Some of the items were in good condition when they arrived at TSLA, but many were in poor shape and thus required conservation treatment. Because the papers arrived in no particular order, they were rearranged according to document type and date.

Denton married a Canadian, Hettie Farr, in 1901, and together they raised a daughter, Mary Farr Denton. Denton himself was raised and educated in Cookeville, Tennessee, but left the state to attend college at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.¹ Throughout his life he was involved in both state and national politics, so many of his papers in the collection reflect the nature of his daily work in various professional positions. There are a number of letters of recommendation written on behalf of J. S. Denton, including a group written in 1910 and another set written in 1931. Another document from 1922 serves as the legal authority for Denton to represent the state of Tennessee as an attorney. Box 1, Folder 15 contains a press release and several letters concerning a political controversy that took place during Henry H. Horton's governorship. Horton's administration was accused of mismanaging finances, and an anti-Horton group, the Public Emergency Committee, was assembled (J. S. Denton was a key committee member) in order to incite public discontent and provoke a full-scale investigation. A fair amount of business correspondence also remains, including a folder of outgoing letters from J. S. Denton (Box 2, Folder 18) and another folder (Box 1, Folder 18) with his incoming correspondence. Much of the incoming correspondence is business-related, although numerous letters concerning genealogy and other family matters are included as well.

A good portion of the Denton Family Papers includes genealogical research findings assembled by various family members and Edythe Whitley, the author of a 1959 book on the Denton family genealogy. Some of the information included was obtained from books or archives and copied down by family researchers. Various notes and genealogical charts concerning the Denton family are also included in the collection. Two essays written by H. Denton are of particular use, "A Sketch," an autobiographical essay, and "Family Genealogy," which provides background information on the family's genealogy. These narratives provide the researcher with a good understanding of the family history, but they are by no means complete, and their accuracy could be called

¹ The collection includes a publication about Georgetown University that was presumably owned by J. S. Denton, a book called *Georgetown University in DC, 1789-1907: Its founders, benefactors, officers, instructors, and alumni*.

into question.² Finally, although the collection includes several photographs, these are useful primarily for genealogical purposes; all of the photographs are of tombstones of family members.

Of special interest in the collection is a notebook from around 1915 that contains songs, poems, stories, music programs, and other items of sentimental importance to the Denton family. Included in the notebook are a famous Dutch lullaby, popular songs, such as “The Cushville Hop,” and a humorous ditty entitled “Wish’t I Wuz a Gurl,” and a short story written by Oscar Wilde.³ The later part of the notebook contains music programs and plays that Mary Farr Denton had participated in as a young girl. Many of the programs are presented by pupils from “expression” classes; not surprisingly, many of the songs written down in the notebook contain detailed notes concerning proper expression, emphasis, and accompanying gesticulations or body movements. It thus appears that the notebook primarily contains songs intended for Mary Farr Denton’s performances, but not every entry is annotated.

Although the majority of the collection provides the researcher with an understanding of the family’s genealogical history, legal agreements, and business concerns (primarily J. S. Denton’s), a few items will shed light on the personal lives of Denton family members. Several personal letters to and from family members remain, in addition to wedding invitations, funeral registries, and John Savage Denton’s wedding book, which includes the signatures of guests. Other documents of related interest to the Denton Family Papers include a legal judgment issued by a county court clerk in 1789, *Denton, Joseph vs. Joseph Blake and John Cox*, Judgment 1789, Accession Number 89.135, located at VII-L-3.

Bibliography

Whitley, Edythe. *Some of the Descendants of Rev. Richard Denton*. McMinnville: Womack Printing Company, 1959.

² H. Denton mentions that his grandfather, Abraham Denton, was a Captain in the Revolutionary War, but when J. S. Denton requested pension information concerning Abraham and Joseph Denton in 1895, he was told that their names were not found in the records. (See Box 2, Folder 17 & Box 2, Folder 5)

³ See Appendix A for a transcription of one of the songs recorded in the notebook, “The Cushville Hop” by Ben King, and Appendix B for a transcription of “Wish’t I Wuz a Girl” (author not listed), another tune also transcribed in the Denton family notebook. Both of these songs were performed (sung or recited) by Mary Farr Denton in 1915. The lyrics of these songs reflect attitudes about race and gender common to this era in American history.

CONTAINER LIST

Box 1: Legal and business papers, correspondence, and other papers

- Folder 1: Newspaper clippings (1905-1943 or no date)
- Folder 2: Wedding book for John Savage Denton & Hettie Farr (1901)
- Folder 3: Papers documenting the Farr-Denton-Murrey-Patterson House addition to the National Register (1884)
- Folder 4: Notebook with songs, clippings, stories, poetry, music programs, etc. (circa 1915)
- Folder 5: Two hand-written letters to (Uncle) John Savage Denton & (Aunt) Hettie Farr Denton from "Mary Alice" (no date)
- Folder 6: Legal document: Deed concerning property arrangements between D. Farr and Mr. & Mrs. John S. Denton (1918)
- Folder 7: John S. Denton's business card, J.A. Denton's business card (originally found with a letter dated June 29, 1875, from J. A. Denton to J. S. Denton), business card of a family acquaintance from Sweden, & Georgetown University commencement invitation
- Folder 8: Legal document: agreement for the purchase and sale of real estate between John S. Bransford, John S. Denton, & Laurence B. Howard (1930)
- Folder 9: Legal document: patent agreement concerning John Denton, Daniel Morgan, and William Griffith (1895)
- Folder 10: Legal document: land purchasing agreement for J. S. Denton from Sandy Brown (1929)
- Folder 11: Legal document: authorization of John S. Denton's employment (as an attorney) for the State of Tennessee (1922)
- Folder 12: Legal document: agreement between J. S. Denton & Laurence B. Howard concerning property right-of-way and the Nashville Interurban Railway (1929)
- Folder 13: Inventory of Colored Tennessee Industrial School Property (J. S. Denton, Receiver) (Let to Reformatory) (1915)
- Folder 14: Message from Governor Tom C. Rye to the 60th General Assembly of Tennessee regarding the State's Financial Condition (circa 1916)
- Folder 15: Press release from the Public Emergency Committee (circa 1931) concerning Governor Horton, one letter against Horton's governorship, & one letter supporting him and criticizing the Public Emergency Committee
- Folder 16: Letters of recommendation for John S. Denton (1910)
- Folder 17: Letters of recommendation for John S. Denton (1931)
- Folder 18: Incoming correspondence for John S. Denton (1895-1932)
- Folder 19: Miscellaneous correspondence (1855-1988 or no date)

Box 2: Genealogical research findings, correspondence, & other papers

- Folder 1: Genealogical research findings: Denton family lineage in England (pages are numbered 1-14)
- Folder 2: Genealogical research findings: Denton family lineage (pages are numbered 1-27, page 3 is listed twice)
- Folder 3: Denton family genealogical notes (includes genealogical notes on Allen family)
- Folder 4: Genealogical research findings: Denton family lineage (pages are numbered 1-6, page 2 is listed twice)
- Folder 5: Pension records concerning John Griggs, Abraham Denton, & Joseph Denton (1895) (Request for information made by John S. Denton)
- Folder 6: Genealogical findings: Miscellaneous notes and genealogical charts concerning Denton family lineage
- Folder 7: Samuel Denton & Denton family genealogical charts
- Folder 8: Copy of Abraham Denton, Sr.'s will (original was dated at 1774)
- Folder 9: Genealogical findings: Denton family records concerning John Denton and Samuel Denton (information taken from offices of Secretary of State at Trenton, New Jersey) (includes note from W. B. Denton of Detroit, Michigan)
- Folder 10: Genealogical findings: Denton family records taken from *The Documentary History of New York* (Governor Stuyvesant to the Magistrates of Heemstead)
- Folder 11: Genealogical findings: Transcribed document written by Daniel Denton and taken from Hempstead Town Records
- Folder 12: Genealogical findings: Transcribed records concerning the Denton family members
- Folder 13: Genealogical findings: Notes from marriage records concerning the Denton family
- Folder 14: Genealogical findings: Transcribed records from *The History of Randolph County, Indiana*, concerning the Denton family
- Folder 15: Genealogical findings from White County & Gainesboro
- Folder 16: Genealogical findings: Denton family history in England
- Folder 17: *A Sketch* by H. Denton (autobiographical essay, no date) & *Family Genealogy* by H. Denton (essay on family genealogy, no date)
- Folder 18: Correspondence: Outgoing correspondence from John S. Denton (1895)
- Folder 19: Correspondence: Letters from H. Denton to "son," or J. S. Denton (1895)
- Folder 20: Correspondence: Outgoing correspondence from Hettie Farr Denton (1931)
- Folder 21: Denton family bank receipts (Williamson County, 4 items, early 1920s)
- Folder 22: Mrs. J. S. Denton's accounts with Wagner & Company grocery (1922, 1924)
- Folder 23: Accounts information from Office of Jere Whitson (1894-1899)
- Folder 24: DAR materials (includes letter from Mrs. Mary Alice Whitson Lowe from 1964 & a copy of her 1930 application for membership to the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution).

- Folder 25: Charter of Incorporation for Middle Tennessee Seed Farms Co., includes J. S. Denton as partial owner (May 1919)
- Folder 26: Middle Tennessee Seed Farms Company records (company prospectus and stock holder statements)
- Folder 27: Wedding invitations (John Savage Denton & Hettie Farr in 1901 & Frank Lester Murrey & Mary Farr in 1924)
- Folder 28: Galley proof of Luke Lea speech for the *Congressional Record* (no date)
- Folder 29: Mary Farr Denton's report card from Birmingham Public Schools (1912, 1913)
- Folder 30: Funeral register pages, cards, & newspaper clippings (Mrs. Mary Farr Murrey, 1972) (Frank Lester Murrey, 1977)

Box 3: Newspaper printing block

Newspaper printing block of a woman (no date)

Box 4: Photographs

- Folder 1: Photograph of Cynthia Denton's tombstone (Jere Whitson's half-sister) (1972)
- Folder 2: Photograph of Lucinda's tombstone, widow of J. W. Whitson and wife of H. Denton (1972)
- Folder 3: Photograph of the Whitson & Denton graveyard (includes tombstones and 5 unidentified people) (1972)
- Folder 4: Photograph of Alice Denton's tombstone (Jere Whitson's half-sister) (1972)

Box 5: Denton family genealogical book

Denton family genealogical book owned by Mary Farr Denton Murray of Franklin, Tennessee, 415 pages, compiled by Edythe Rucker Whitley, 1933

Oversized items

Folder 1:

One genealogical chart of the Denton family assembled by Edythe Whitley (not encapsulated & typed)

Three genealogical charts of the Denton family (all encapsulated & hand-written)

Books that belonged to the Denton family now in the TSLA library:

Easby-Smith, James S. *Georgetown University in DC, 1789-1907: Its founders, benefactors, officers, instructors, and alumni*. Vol. 2. New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1907.

Savage, John H. *Life of John H. Savage: Citizen, Soldier, Lawyer, Congressman*. 1903.

Whitley, Edythe. *Some of the Descendants of Rev. Richard Denton*. McMinnville: Womack Printing Company, 1959.

Appendix A

The Cushville Hop

by Ben King

I'se gwine daun to the Cushville hop
An' dar ain' no niggahs gwine to make me stop;
Missus gwine to deck me all up in white,
Go watch de step dat I'se getting' in ter-night.
Um-hum, my honey, turn me loose;
Um-hum, my honey, watch me shine
When mah foot am a-shakin in de ole coonjine.

No black niggahs come foolin' round me;
I'se jes' to look at, anyone can see;
I'se jes' a ornament, an' I mus' 'fess
No niggah put is ahm roun' mah snow-white dress
Um-hum, niggah, keep away, understand?
Um-hum, niggah, look aut fo' yo' hand;
I'se jes' ter gaze at, I mus' 'fess,
So don't put yo' ahm round' mah snow white dress.

Bring out de banjo, plunk-plank-pling;
Watch de motion of mah step an' mah swing;
Don't yo' pestah me an make me stop
When I git in motion at de Cushville hop
Um-hum, niggah, keep away, keep away!
Um-hum, niggah, not ter-day, not ter-day!
Keep away from me kase I done kain't stop;
I'se jes caught mah motion fo' de Cushville hop.

Appendix B

Wish't I wuz a Gurl
(Bradford, Pa., Era) (?)

Wish't I wuz a gurl,
Stid uv fein' a boy,
An' bang my hair an' eat ice cream,
An' ride ahind my feller's team,
Like gurls duz—
Wish't I wuz a gurl!

Wish't I wuz a gurl!
An' when't come Sunday nite,
I'd whack that old pianner,
Just clean up outer (?) sight;
An' I'd marry some rich feller
Like girls duz—
Wish't I wuz a gurl!

Wish't I wuz a gurl,
I'd just chaw gum an' talk,
An' when aut ter promernod,
I'd take up all the walk,
Like some gurls duz—
Wish't I wuz a gurl!

Wish't I wuz a gurl;
All boys good fer is't
Fer curry coal an' run odd jobs.
An' get off the walk for mean old snobs,
Like I did t' other nite—
Wish't I wuz a gurl.

Wish't I wuz a gurl;
Wish't the Lord made all boys gurls!
An' made gurls boys, tud here (?) the same,
An' I'd hen (?) Lizzy Ann by name,
An' she'd hen (?) John or Joe, stid of Jane;
Wish't he had—
Wish't I wuz a gurl!