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DONNELL, JAMES WEBB SMITH
(1820-1877)
PAPERS
1820-1932

(THS Collection)

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INTRODUCTION

This collection is centered around two families: the James Webb Smith Donnell family and the John Nelson Spottswood Jones family. Both families were prominent in Alabama and to a lesser extent in Tennessee. They were large land owners and prosperous planters who lost most of their fortunes and land due to the Civil War. The Donnell family had many prominent ministers, the most important being Robert Donnell, a founder of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The Jones family included prominent individuals in the fields of law and politics. The James Webb Smith Donnell Papers were deposited with the Tennessee Historical Society in 1932 by Mrs. Octavia Donnell Carney, Belle Mina, Alabama, daughter of the owner.

The materials in this finding aid measure 1.26 linear feet. There are no restrictions on the materials. Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the James Webb Smith Donnell Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The James Webb Smith Donnell Papers, containing 612 items and 2 volumes, cover the years 1820-1932. The collection is composed of correspondence, accounts, legal papers (affidavits, agreements and contracts, court records, a decree of bankruptcy, and land agreements), biographical data, a memorandum book, and other miscellaneous material.

The largest amount of correspondence in the collection was written by James Webb Smith Donnell. He wrote to his wife, Maria, about family and farm news, the military (1860s) around Montgomery, Alabama, and contracts with freedmen; to his daughter, Nannie, directing her to be observant and learn all she could about the North during her vacation to the northeast; and to his son, Robert, admonishing him to follow instructions and send money to the family. He wrote to various individuals concerning business or legal affairs, and to his overseer or partner, William Weems, he wrote concerning farm business, supplying wood for crossties for the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, and the possible selling of his plantation, "Seclusion," near Jonesboro, Alabama.

Other people wrote to James Webb Smith Donnell concerning farm business, selling cotton, payment for accounts, wood supplied for cross ties and later the trains on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, an endowment fund for Cumberland University, legal affairs, painting portraits, and some views on politics.

The family correspondence, besides that written by Donnell, makes up the remainder of the correspondence. Family connections, including the Donnell, Dearing, Jones, Lindley, Ridley, Smith, and Peete families, corresponded with one another. One of the most interesting letters was one written by the Reverend Jacob Lindley to Robert Donnell (1854) telling him of his life. Other topics of conversation between the families included illness and death, courtship, business dealings, schooling at local institutions and at Cumberland University and Georgetown College, vacation, some politics, the cotton crop, and a description of the Washington Territory.

The accounts are divided into those belonging to James Webb Smith Donnell, Maria Donnell, Robert Donnell, John Nelson Spottswood Jones, and miscellaneous accounts of other individuals. James Webb Smith Donnell carried accounts with members of his family, his plantation, the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company and the J.T. and W.P. Tanner and Company. He also accumulated receipts for such items as express and freight tickets, taxes, and school tuition. Maria Donnell's accounts are receipts for taxes, court costs, and cotton. Robert Donnell's accounts included receipts for shares in the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company, an endowment fund at Cumberland University, and an itemized bill with J.P. Coman for medical expenses. John Nelson Spottswood Jones carried accounts with various individuals besides keeping receipts for recording deeds, paying rent, school tuition, the purchase of Negroes, and paying taxes.

Some of the most interesting contracts are those between James Webb Smith Donnell and freedmen after the Civil War. The freedmen are listed by name and sometimes by age. Another interesting contract is that of a marriage contract (1848) between Thomas P. Hawkins of Weakley County, Tennessee, and Frances Ray of Davidson County,

Tennessee, in which Miss Ray would be able to retain in her name such property and slaves as she owned.

James Webb Smith Donnell was an officer in the firm W.P. Tanner and Company. This firm suffered a great loss due to the Civil War and was never able to recover. In 1869, Donnell filed for bankruptcy. Earlier, in 1861, William P. Tanner wrote to Donnell suggesting that the partnership be dissolved, but apparently this was never done. Donnell lost a great deal in the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company, as he held several shares of stock in the company. Also, his land was confiscated in the War and, finally, when it was recovered, he was unable to pay the taxes or retain the land. His daughter, Octavia Donnell Carney, stated that James Webb Smith Donnell died bankrupt.

Within the collection there is biographical material on John Nelson Spottswood Jones and Haywood Jones, as well as a biographical sketch of Robert Donnell by his son, James Webb Smith Donnell, in the Memorandum Book.

Robert Donnell's Memorandum Book lists the marriages which he performed in Alabama and Tennessee for the years 1813-1826. He also lists some baptisms, gives notes on his children, four of whom died in childhood, and gives the names and ages of Negroes.

There are also other miscellaneous items, such as newspaper clippings giving some genealogical data, some certificates and other documents, a map of a township, checks, and promissory notes.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

James Webb Smith Donnell

- 1820 July 13 – Born in Limestone County, Alabama, the first and only child of the Reverend Robert Donnell and Ann E. (Smith) Donnell to live to manhood
- 1828 November 3 – His mother, Ann E. (Smith) Donnell died.
- 1831 the Reverend Robert Donnell was appointed as a missionary to Western Pennsylvania
- 1832 June 21 – the Reverend Donnell married Clara W. Lindley, daughter of the Reverend Jacob Lindley, president of Ohio University
- 1839 Married Maria Louise Jones
- Prosperous landowner and farmer
- Lived in Courtland Valley, Alabama
- 1863 Member of Alabama House of Representatives from Limestone County, Alabama
- Lost property and fortune due to Civil War
- 1877 Died

John Nelson Spottswood Jones

- 1792 Born in Louisa County, Virginia, son of Llewellyn Jones
- 1802 Moved with family to Rutherford County, Tennessee
- Received early education from the Reverend Gideon Blackburn at Murfreesboro, Tennessee
- 1810 Family moved to Madison County, Alabama
- 1814 Went to Yale College
- Studied under Dr. Timothy D. Wright
- 1818 Graduated
- Read law with Judge John Haywood
- 1821 May 3 – Married Eliza Haywood, youngest daughter of Judge Haywood
- 1822 December – Moved to Limestone County, Alabama
- 1829 Justice of the Peace in Limestone County, Alabama
- Prosperous planter and landowner
- 1854 November 17 - Died

CONTAINER LIST

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1. Account Book – Donnell, J.W.S.
2. Accounts – Donnell, J.W.S.
3. Accounts – Donnell, J.W.S.
4. Accounts – Donnell, J.W.S.
5. Accounts – Donnell, Maria
6. Accounts – Donnell, Robert
7. Accounts – Jones, J.N.S.
8. Accounts – Jones, J.N.S.
9. Accounts – Jones, J.N.S.
10. Accounts – Jones, J.N.S.
11. Accounts - Miscellaneous
12. Biographical Material – Jones, John Nelson Spottswood, and Haywood Jones
13. Certificates and other documents
14. Checks

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1. Correspondence – Adams - Byrd
2. Correspondence – Cannon - Cruse
3. Correspondence – Dearing - Donnell
4. Correspondence – Outgoing – Donnell, J.W.S.
5. Correspondence – Outgoing – Donnell, J.W.S. - Weems, William
6. Correspondence – Donnell
7. Correspondence – Edmundson - Halsey
8. Correspondence – Haywood - Hubbard
9. Correspondence – Johnson - Jordan
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11. Correspondence – Kilpatrick - Lowry
12. Correspondence – McClure - Morre
13. Correspondence – Nelson - Pleasants
14. Correspondence – Rather - Ridley
15. Correspondence – Roddy - Ross
16. Correspondence – Sanders - Vinson
17. Correspondence – Walker - Weems
18. Correspondence – Wilson - Zells
19. Correspondence – Unknown
20. Correspondence – Donor papers (Octavia Donnell Carney – W.A. Provine)

Box 3

1. Estate Papers
2. Legal papers – Affidavits, agreements and contracts
3. Legal papers – Court records
4. Legal papers – Decree of bankruptcy
5. Legal papers – Land agreement
6. Lists
7. Map of township
8. Memorandum book – Donnell, Robert
9. Military pass and oath of allegiance
10. Miscellaneous material
11. Newspaper clippings
12. Promissory notes
13. Writings

(The following additional items were processed in 1984)

14. Accounts – Mrs. Octavia Isabella Adair, 1857-1858
15. Accounts – Augustus B. Washington, 1842-1849
16. Advertisements
17. Clippings – Whittier and “Barbara Frietchie”
18. Correspondence – Adair - Wheatcroft
19. Genealogical Data – Carney family
20. Land Records – Deed – Thos. Bass to Benjamin Peete, 1823
21. Land Records – Deed – Delia Gather to Benhamin Peete, 1821
22. Land Records – Deed – Edwin & Irby Jones to Benjamin Peete, 1818
23. Land Records – Sales – 1868
24. Legal Documents – Slaves Bills of Sale – 1854
25. Lists – Miscellaneous
26. Promissory Note – Jones & Donnell to Adair, 1854

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- Austin, Jesse S. to Guards and Pickets, 1862, re: pass for J.W.S. Donnell to go to his plantation near Jonesboro, Alabama, 2-1
- Anderson, A. to J.W. S. Donnell, 1858, re: shipment of fencing, 2-1
- Anderson, T.C. to Reverend R. Donnell, 1851, re: recommendation for the position of "preacher and teacher for Athens," 2-1
- Arnett, J.A. to J.W.S. Donnell, 1857, re: sending sewing machine, 2-1
- Ashford, Thomas H. to J.W.S. Donnell, 1856, re: an account with a Mr. Fulton, 2-1
- Berry, W.W. to J.W. S. Donnell, 1856, re: thanks for payment and will; send blasting powder as soon as possible, 2-1
- Bryant, D. to J.W.S. Donnell (5), 1859-1862, re: wood that is being supplied to the trains, 2-1
- Byrd, Edmund E. to James Donald, 1853, re: enclosing \$200 and stating that he will get the signatures for the deed, 2-1
- Cannon, D.A. to J.W.S. Donnell, 1873, re: paying taxes, 2-2
- Carney, Octavia Donnell to W.A. Provine (6), 1926-1931, re: the Donnell Papers and disposition of the same, 2-20
- Caruthers, Robert L. to J.W.S. Donnell (2), 1856, re: contributing to the endowment fund at Cumberland University, 2-2
- Cataniss, Charles P. to J.W.S. Donnell, 1865, re: cotton account, 2-2
- Chadick, William D. to James Donnell, 1856, re: asking qualifications of Mr. Severs as overseer for a Mrs. Russell in Huntsville, Alabama, 2-2
- Coman, J.H. to the girls and Mr. Donnell (2), 1855, re: filling several commissions for the girls; father of Mr. Donnell desires to see him; other family news; scarlet fever in Athens, 2-2
- Connors, George to James W.S. Donnell, 1860, re: business dealings; family visiting soon; views on the Democratic Party and Buchanan, 2-2
- Cordle, C.W.A. to Mr. S. Jones, 1837, re: wanting to buy some corn, 2-2
- Cruse, S. to James W.S. Donnell (2), 1852-1859, re: business of Memphis and Charleston Railroad and redemption of railroad bonds, 2-2
- Dearing, A.L. to James W.S. Donnell (4), 1852-1857, re: family news; farm news; hot weather and illness in South Carolina; business dealings, 2-3
- Dearing, C. St. Clair to James Donnell, 1856, re: his participation in the Indian War; description of Washington Territory, 2-3
- Dearing, Marcie to Niece, Clara Donnell, n.d., re: music lessons; desiring a visit, 2-3

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Stewart, W. to J.W.S. Donnell (2), 1858, re: specifications of railing and date when it can be ready, 2-16

Tanner, John T. to J.W.S. Donnell (2), 1863-1875, re: traveling through Federal lines; money matters and the estate of J.H. Jones, 2-16

Tanner, William P. to J.W.S. Donnell, 1861, re: proposing dissolution of partnership, 2-16

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Washington, A.B. to J.N.S. Jones, 1850, re: country is in good health; enclosing letter to H.S. Foote, 2-17

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Washington, A.B., Jr. to uncle J.N.S. Jones, 1853, re: progress at school, 2-17

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Wilson, J.G. to Mr. Donnell, 1855, re: report on children away at school, 2-18

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Young, D.B. to J.W.S. Donnell (4), 1860-1861, re: business affairs; death of Judge Parsens; Robert Donnell going to school, 2-18

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Unknown correspondent to mother Mrs. Spottswood Jones, n.d., re: news from Texas; illness of Mr. Peete; desiring news from home, 2-19

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Note: The following letters were added to the collection in 1984.

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Brooks Rupture Appliance Co. (2) to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1928, re: prices for stamps and Confederate money

Carney, Octavia (Donnell) to Chicago Coin & Stamp Co., 1928, re: sale of paper collectibles

Central Book Co., (2) to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1917 and 1928, re: sale of Presidents' signatures and Confederate stamps; appraisal of letters and stamps.

The Arthur D. Clark Co., to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1927, re: appraisal of old books and papers

College of William and Mary to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1900, re: price for back issues of Quarterly Historical Magazine

Dearborn Stamp Co., (3) to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1928, re: appraisal of Confederate stamps

Gantt(?), W.W. (2) to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1896-1897, re: ancestors who were colonial governors of Virginia

Green, N. to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1899, re: endowment of a Robert Donnell chair at Cumberland University

Hansell, Antonina (Jones) to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1897, re: Nina's death

Office of Henry Ford to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1928, re: appraisal of old documents

The Pictorial Review Co., to [Octavia (Donnell) Carney], n.d., re: disposal of old slave and land deeds

The Smith Book Co., to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1927, re: paper collectibles wanted for purchase

Spottswood, Dandridge (3) to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1899-1900, re: genealogical info on Jones – Dandridge families

Swain, Margaret to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1926, re: antiques and stamps for sale

Wheatcroft, Clara B. to Octavia (Donnell) Carney, 1900, re: invitation for tea