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LEA, JOHN OVERTON
(1846-1912)
FAMILY PAPERS
1867-1911

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INTRODUCTION

The papers of John Overton Lea, descendant of early Tennessee families, Nashville lawyer, importer and breeder of Sussex cattle, and large property holder in Memphis, Tennessee, were given to the Tennessee State Library and Archives Manuscript section by Clendening Robertson, a descendant.

The materials in this finding aid measure 5.88 linear feet. Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the John Overton Lea Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The John Overton Lea Papers containing six volumes and approximately four thousand items, span the period 1867-1911. The collection is composed of accounts (receipted bills, statements in account with Overton & Grosvenor real estate firm in Memphis, Tennessee, and tax records); correspondence; two diaries; documents (a bill, agreements, two powers of attorney, petitions, etc.); papers dealing with Lea's Sussex cattle; and some miscellaneous family papers.

The items of earliest date in the papers are two diaries. One, about twenty pages, and introspective in nature, Lea kept from December 4, 1867, to November 22, 1868. In the first part written at his home, "Lealand," near Nashville, Tennessee, Lea comments that circumstances should be made to further whatever object we have in hand or else our labor is spasmodic and unproductive. He outlines the day into periods of study, rest, recreation, etc. - a schedule which he cannot always follow, much to his sorrow. He appreciates his blessings and wonders if he makes "a fair return upon the talents that have been bestowed upon him." He praises his father and writes that "one who could not be made pure and conscientious under his influence lacks principles from his birth."

A few pages were written while at the University of Virginia studying law. He is still struggling to better himself and to make the most of his time and talents. His comment on tobacco's influence is interesting. He writes that "... the chains that tobacco has woven about me must be struck off. Its use is impairing my usefulness, diminishing my happiness, shortening my life and success will not crown my exertions be directed to what end they may until I am free from the shackles."

The other diary was kept on a European tour from October 4, 1869, to October 14, 1869. He visited Rotterdam, Holland, and the German cities of Cologne, Bonn, Mainz, Weisbaden, Frankfurt, and Baden.

There are three volumes of correspondence, each with an index. Volumes I and III contain letters received in regard to Colonel John Cocke's estate and Mrs. Lea's business interests at Knoxville from the time of Mr. Lea's marriage on August 18, 1870, to 1887. Volume II contains miscellaneous business letters addressed to Mr. Lea from 1879 to 1885. There is one box of correspondence, all but four letters addressed to Overton Lea, from 1881 to 1906, in regard to the Knox County farm, "Trafalgar," Sussex cattle, rental property in Memphis, the dog law, etc. Included are about three hundred letters from Overton & Grosvenor real estate firm, 1882-1893, in regard to Mr. Lea's rental property in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1884, Mr. Lea began importing Sussex cattle from England and by 1888 he had the finest herd in the United States, at which time it consisted of one hundred head valued at \$50,000. Included is a copy of the *American Sussex Register*, 1889-1906, and a copy of the register in Mr. Lea's handwriting; a pamphlet entitled *The Merits of Sussex Cattle* published by The Sussex Herd Book Society, London, England, undated; a certificate of membership given by The National Live Stock Association of the United States to Mr.

Lea, December 3, 1901, Denver, Colorado; eight copies of *The Lealand Herd of Thoroughbred Sussex Cattle*, printed in Nashville, Tennessee in 1885; pedigrees of cattle and horses owned by Mr. Lea; and a volume with the breeding record of his Sussex cattle, 1884-1891.

Documents include an undated copy of a bill to be entitled “an act to establish a state Board of Agriculture and to define its powers and duties” ; a petition from Henry County Farmers Institute, 1901, in favor of a dog law to protect stock; an agreement, 1895, between John M. Lea, Jr. and Bessie Lea, and John M. Thompson and his wife, Mary McConnell, involving a common wall of a building on their adjoining lots; an agreement, 1887, dealing with lands in Shelby County, Tennessee, known as the Overton, Lea, Brinkley and Snowden tracts; an agreement between A. H. Davenport of Boston, Massachusetts, and Overton Lea in regard to some furniture that had been damaged, 1891; a power of attorney from Laura C. Gillespie to Overton Lea in 1896 and one to him in the same year given by Isabel Lawson Gillespie; two papers of a court case, February 13, 1886, in regard to land to be sold which was owned jointly by Laura C. Gillespie and Ella Gillespie; and information in regard to two land grants, 1836, made to Cocke and Richardson.

Included are petitions dated 1901 from about fifty Tennessee counties with approximately six thousand signatures in favor of a dog law to protect the farmer’s sheep. The letters accompanying these petitions contain interesting comments, such as the one from Carroll County written by W. S. Morgan pleading to “make laws to thin out the worthless dogs...Mr. G. B. Hollady’s little girl was bitt by a mad dog last Saturday he is now gon with her in surch for a mad stone to see if same will give realeaf.” Some want the dog law and more and better fences, and as I. N. Jones described them, “...we want more fences and better fences Pig tight bull strong—mule high.”

Five boxes of receipted bills, 1905-1911, contain bills principally from business houses in Nashville, Tennessee, such as D. Loveman & Company (dry goods), Early-Henderson Company (harnesses, saddles, bridles), James Cassety (coke, coal, and wood), Buell & Crockett Insurance, Nuckols & McKay Brothers (stoves, ranges), Cumberland River Coal Company, Davie Printing Company, etc. Included are some bills from concerns in New York City; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Baltimore, Maryland. There is one receipt dated January 24, 1896. This was for pew rent at Christ Episcopal Church, Nashville, from January to April 1896.

Three boxes contain statements in account with Overton & Grosvenor, a real estate firm in Memphis, Tennessee, from 1882 to July 1897, and with Overton & Overton, its successor, from July 1897 to 1903. These statements deal with Mr. Lea’s rental property in Memphis, Tennessee. Included are tax records concerning his property in Shelby County, Tennessee, from 1882 to 1889.

Other items include a booklet entitled, *Addresses in Memory of Overton Lea, Jr.* These addresses were delivered June 28, 1905, at the unveiling of the stained glass window given in memory of Mr. Lea’s eldest son who died in 1905. The window is in the Alpha Tau Omega Chapter House at the University of the South, Sewanee,

Tennessee. One address was given by the Right Reverend Thomas Frank Gailor, Bishop of Tennessee, one by Reverend William Alexander Guerry, Chaplain of the University of the South, and one by the Reverend William Porcher DuBose, Dean of the Theological Department of the University of the South.

There are two architectural drawings in the papers. One is of the first-story finish showing the different height of pilasters for "Lealand," and the other is of the screen between the front and rear hall. George W. Thompson was the architect. Included also is a plan for the foundation of a barn.

The papers contain several notices of horses and jacks at stud, and three little booklets dealing with pedigree horses printed by the Haywood Stock Farm, seven miles south of Nashville on the Nolensville Pike; Clear View Stud, Edgefield Junction; and Woodlawn Stock Farm, Spring Hill, Tennessee.

Included with a few miscellaneous items is an undated, small blueprint which shows the Brinkley-Snowden tract and the projected Raleigh Springs railroad through the property of Robert and Overton Lea in Memphis, Tennessee.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Overton Lea

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 1846 | February 27, born at “Travellers’ Rest,” Nashville, Tennessee |
| 1866 | Graduated from Bethany College, West Virginia |
| 1869 | July 1, graduated from the University of Virginia Law School.
Traveled abroad |
| 1870 | August 18, married Ella Cocke (1846-1935) of Knoxville, Tennessee.
Traveled in Europe on honeymoon |
| 1870 | Passed the law bar, studied in the office of his father, Judge John M. Lea |
| 1870 | Law partnership with Judge David Campbell, Judge John B. McEwen of Franklin, who had offices in Nashville, and Coburn Dewees Berry |
| ca 1874 | Lea and Coburn Dewees Berry left the above firm and formed Berry and Lea |
| 1880 | Retired because of poor health |
| 1884 | Began importation of Sussex cattle from England |
| 1888 | Had finest Sussex herd in the United States |
| 1912 | Died at Chestnut Hill Hospital, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania |

CONTAINER LIST

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3. Certificates
4. Documents
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6. Horses, papers concerning
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10. Service book—"Lealand," 1884-1891
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Correspondence

1. Volume I, 1870-1877
2. Volume II, 1879-1885

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1. Volume III, 1877-1887

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1. Receipted bills, 1905

Box 8

1. Receipted bills, 1906

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1. Receipted bills, 1907

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1. Receipted bills, 1908 and 1909

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