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LEA, ROBERT BRINKLEY
(1849-1895)
FAMILY PAPERS
1849-1900

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INTRODUCTION

The Robert Brinkley Lea Family Papers (1849-1895) are centered around Robert Brinkley Lea (1849-1895) and family members, including John M. Lea (1818-1903), Rebecca (Salmons) Lea (____), and others. Robert B. Lea was a descendant of early Tennessee families, Nashville lawyer, and large property holder in Memphis, Tennessee. The Robert Brinkley Lea Family Papers were a gift from Dr. Cromwell Tidwell of Nashville, Tennessee.

The materials in this finding aid occupy .42 cubic feet of shelf space. Single photocopies of unpublished writings in the Robert B. Lea Papers may be made for purposes of scholarly research.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Robert B. Lea Family Papers, containing approximately 130 items span the period 1871-1900, and are composed of accounts (bills and receipts); cards (sympathy); correspondence; a eulogy; financial documents; legal documents; lists; obituary; school records (notes and compositions from college curriculum); and vital records (documents in French).

The items of earliest date in the papers are from 1871, the year Robert Brinkley Lea (1849-1895) graduated from Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut. Nearing graduation, Robert wrote his father, the Honorable Judge John M. Lea (1818-1903), to express gratitude for his father's patience and support, stating, "that I have been able to graduate at all, has been owing entirely to your indulgence and great affection, and not to any merits of my own." However advantaged Lea may have been when monetary resources were in need, he sought the approval of his father, writing, "I hope that your kindness and your example have not been entirely thrown away and that I may in the future repay you by being a good and virtuous citizen."

Three compositions by Lea are included with such important themes as "States' Rights"; "Reconstruction"; and "Attending Divine Services." Each composition shows considerable depth of reason, argument, and scholarly effort. He is especially knowledgeable about politics in his home state of Tennessee, and how post-Civil War issues were present in the minds of people in the South. School records and correspondence pertaining to Lea's college years indicate that he was an exceptional student and well-liked by schoolmates.

Included in the collection are approximately 95 letters which tell the story about Robert's relatively short but accomplished life, as well as the lives of his wife, Rebecca (Salmons), and their two children John M. II (d.1899), and Bessie. Most of the correspondence tells about Robert's travels in Europe, 1872-1874; Robert's family residence in Switzerland, 1890-1895; events surrounding and following his death on January 8, 1895, in Geneva; and the survival of his family and estate from 1895-1900. Little is mentioned about Robert's activities between 1874-1890, except what can be inferred by his obituary, that he "stood high as a lawyer and citizen."

A large amount of the correspondence is addressed to Judge John M. Lea, who was the guiding influence of Robert, his brother Overton (1846-1912), and their immediate families. It was likely the Judge who saved the correspondence and protected it for the sake of memory. Fortunately, enough letters have been kept to profile the Lea family, even as they resided in Davos, Switzerland, for five years because of health reasons.

Documents include an indenture signed by John M. Lea and his sons, Robert and Overton, in order to buy a house on Vine Street in 1878. This was to become the city residence while they still maintained a house at "Lealand" and also a country retreat at Monteagle. A copy of the deed signed by Clerk and Master Robert Ewing is included along with written agreements of payment.

Petitions made by John M. Lea are included for the estate of Robert B. Lea, which had been willed to Rebecca and the children. Contained within the petition are detailed descriptions of the property owned by Robert in Memphis, Tennessee, with instructions as to their use. John M. Lea only served as executor of the estate as long as it was in debt because he “felt it his duty to undergo the responsibility of protecting and trying to get into good shape the property belonging to his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren.

Three copies of documents, handwritten and in French, give a detailed report about Robert’s death in Geneva. A deposition is given by the Chief of Police, A. Benoit, Dr. Etienne Golay, and the family physician, Dr. Vaulliet. A summary translation of the documents is included. The news of Robert’s sudden “heart- failure” shocked many who knew him in Europe as well as in the United States. Contrary to the accepted cause of death which was said to be natural, the depositions reveal the facts which conclude that he was in a disturbed condition, and took his own life in the Hotel Beau Rivage.

Approximately one third of the correspondence is comprised of sympathy cards and letters addressed to Rebecca and to Judge Lea. One letter addressed to Rebecca was from Ben H. Ridgely, the United States Consul at Geneva, and one of only three of President Cleveland’s appointees left in Europe. Ridgely sent his sympathies, saying, “I think of you always as one of the best and bravest women in the world.”

The Robert B. Lea Papers give an inside view of this prominent Nashville family. Although the collection centers on Robert, it also discloses the experiences and personalities of the Judge, the widow, and the children as they struggled to overcome sorrow, distance, illness, and financial adversity following his untimely death.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robert Brinkley Lea

- 1849 May 7, born in Nashville, Tennessee
- 1871 Graduated from Yale College, New Haven, Connecticut
- 1872-1873 Studied Roman Law at University in Paris, France
- ca. 1874 Married Rebecca Salmons of Franklin, Kentucky
Traveled in Europe on honeymoon
- 1880 Elected member of the Board of the Trustees of the University of Nashville
- ca. 1890 Retired from law practice and moved to Davos, Switzerland because of
health
- 1895 January 8, died in Geneva, Switzerland

CONTAINER LIST

Box 1

1. Accounts — Bills & Receipts — Lea, Robert B., 1871
2. Accounts — Bills & Receipts — Overton, John, 1990
3. Cards — Sympathy — 1895
4. Correspondence — Berg-Edwin
5. Correspondence — Gardener-Justi
6. Correspondence — Lea, John M. Sr.
7. Correspondence — Lea, John M. Sr.
8. Correspondence — Lea, John M. Sr.
9. Correspondence — Lea, Rebecca
10. Correspondence — Lea, Robert B.
11. Correspondence — Leake, Bessie (Lea-Kelly)
12. Correspondence — Link-Metcalf
13. Correspondence — Parting-Sweet
14. Correspondence — Thacher-Williams
15. Eulogy — Lea, Robert B., 1895
16. Financial Documents — Cancelled bond — Lea, John M., 1869
17. Legal Documents — Indentures — Lea, John M., 1879-1881
18. Legal Documents — Petition — Lea, John M., 1895
19. Lists — Personal Property — Lea, John M., 1891
20. Obituary — Lea, Robert B., 1895
21. School Records — Map of Greece — Lea, Robert B., 1871
22. School Records — Lecture Notes — Lea, Robert B., 1871
23. School Records — Compositions — “States Rights” — Lea, Robert B., 1871
24. School Records — Compositions — “Reconstruction” — Lea, Robert B., 1871
25. School Records — Compositions — “Divine Services” — Lea, Robert B., 1871
26. School Records—Report Cards—Lea, Robert B., University School, Nashville, 1863
27. Vital Records — Depositions — Benoit, A.; Vulliet; Golay, E., Geneva. 1895

NAME INDEX

This is a name index of correspondence in the Robert B. Lea Papers, together with the dates of the letters and information regarding their contents. The figures in parentheses denote the number of letters, if more than one. The last numbers refer to the box and folder in which the material is to be found.

- Berg, F. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Geneva; sympathy; mentions Rebecca's sister, 1-4
- Cahal, Dee to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: from Nashville; sympathy; remembers Robert's thoughtful assistance during a time of need, 1-4
- Cooke, Bernard H. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-4
- Cooke, Hay to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: sympathy, 1-4
- Doyle, L. Conan to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos to Geneva; telegram, 1-4
- Drake, Julia A. to Judge John M. Lea, 1899, re: a teacher seeking advice about her career, 1-4
- Dudley, Charles B. to Judge John M. Lea, 1871, re: from Yale; secretary inquiring about Robert, 1-4
- Edwin, Lizzie to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy; religious encouragement, 1-4
- Gardner, Edwin S. to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: from Avondale; sympathy, 1-5
- Goodlett, Caroline to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: sympathy; religious; Col. Goodlett in a feeble state, 1-5
- Gordon, Rev. Percy to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Geneva; sympathy; mentions baptismal ceremony of Bessie; invites Mrs. Lea to confirmation, 1-5
- Hawkins, Emily to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Reigate, England; sympathy, 1-5
- Hemmick, Mrs. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: sympathy, 1-5
- Hine, Charles D. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: from Detroit, Michigan; schoolmate; teaching school; description of work, 1-5
- Huggard, Dr., to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos to Geneva; telegrams (2), 1-5
- Jones, Laura E. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-5
- Justi, Herman to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: from Nashville; business matters; sympathy; dividends on deposit for Tennessee School for the Blind, 1-5
- Lea, Judge John M. (6) to Mrs. Elizabeth (Overton) Lea, 1873-1883, re: mostly to Monteagle, Tennessee; family news; personal news; yellow fever in Memphis; garden has been planted at Lealand; mentions friends and family members, 1-6
- to Mrs. Lewis, 1896, re: from Vine Street; sends thanks for assisting Mrs. Lea during emergency; Mrs. Rebecca Lea's health is delicate, 1-6

- (2) to Overton & Grosvenor, 1895, re: family business; family matters; instructions about forwarding money to Rebecca at Davos; placed Bessie in school in New York; comments about cost of tuition, “cost’s about as much for half session in advance as was spent on my entire college education;” mentions 78th birthday, 1-6
- Lea, John M. Jr. to (Grandfather) John M. Lea, 1899, re: from Davos; personal news; good handwriting; views on politics and relations with England; shares grandfather’s displeasure with politicians; subscription to New York Herald; opinion of English class system; mentions letter from cousin Anne Brinkley, 1-7
- Lea, Overton to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Nashville; telegram; sympathy over death of Robert; message from father requesting body to be shipped home “without delay”, 1-8
- Lea, Rebecca to Mrs. Elizabeth Lea, 1874, re: from Venice; sightseeing; impressions of Venice, 1-9
- (10) to Judge John M. Lea, 1895-1899, re: mostly from Davos; family matters; health matters; bereavement following Robert’s death; John M. Lea’s condition and illness; living and doctor’s expenses; many cards and letters received with sympathy; news about Bessie at school in Geneva; sister came to stay and care for John M.; John M. enjoys letters from grandfather; sends photos of Robert; Rebecca in poor health; mentions Consul Ridgley’s affections for Lea family; discussion between John M. and well known mathematician about religion; mentions marital problems between Bessie and Dalton Kelly; Dr. Vullict’s prognosis about Bessie; disagreement with Mrs. McAllister; from Varese, Italy, asks for annuity in order to pay bills; from Franklin, Kentucky, after death of John M.; living with Bessie; no hurry to settle estate; would like to winter in Nashville, 1-9
- (2) to (Son) John M. Lea, 1893, re: from Davos; family news; mentions Dalton Kelly; advises son not to get entangled with serious relationships at school; mentions a letter from Col. Snowden; from St. Moritz; traveling to Innsbruck; excursion to Maloja; Bessie’s attraction to pet dogs, 1-9
- Lea, Robert B. (4) to (Mother) Elizabeth Lea, 1872-1890, re: from Tallahassee, Florida; comforts ailing mother; returning home soon; considered going to Cuba; plans to sail to Europe, from Paris; studying French and Roman law; visited tapestry making with Willie Goodwin at Gobelins—famous manufactory of tapestries; plans to visit Rome; plans to visit Bonn, Germany; from Davos (1890); putting John M. into school under Mr. Sillig; Rebecca in poor health; descriptions of Davos in winter time, 1-10
- (8) to (Father) John M. Lea, 1874-1894, re: family matters; personal matters; from Yale; nearing graduation; gratitude for assistance and support; from Munich, Germany; traveled from Vienna through thick fog; sleigh ride in Munich; mentions his wife Rebecca—not very enthusiastic; traveling to Venice; from Florence; wishes father a happy 55th birthday; traveling to Pisa and then

Rome by New years; From Memphis, Tennessee; business matters; from Franklin, Kentucky; crossed communications—Robert and son are in USA, while Rebecca and Bessie are in London—not receiving each other’s telegrams; from London; telegram to father; from Davos; describes the transportation of John M. From London to Davos by train; Dr. Huggard in charge of son’s condition; financial strain; wrote father on his 75th birthday (the last letter Robert wrote, just days before his death); gratitude for gift; beautiful scenery at Davos; mentions old friend named Mark, 1-10

- (3) to (Son) John M. Lea, 1893, re: from Davos; family news; general advice to improve health and obey Grandfather while under his care; mentions Dalton Kelly; from Tiefenkasten; on the way to St. Moritz; family news; from Austrian Tyrol; describes travel route and conditions; reminisces about traveling with son; Stelvis Pass—highest carriage road in Alps; train to Innsbruck, 1-10
- to Overton Lea, 1894, re: from London; family matters; details about condition of John M.—has not walked in three weeks—pneumonia; living at hospital boarding house; wants to return to Davos, 1-10
- Leake, Bessie (Lea-Kelly) (5) to (Grandfather) John M. Lea, 1893-1899, re: family news; from Rome; school trip; sightseeing; interested in Ancient Mythology; mentions cousin Luke Lea and an incident with a horse; from Franklin, Kentucky; married to Dalton Kelly; with child; requests grandfather to send items; from Cincinnati, Ohio; personal matters; mentions Mr. McClanahan and visiting her son in Franklin; requests that grandfather not mention the events of the past, 1-11
- to (Brother) John M. Lea Jr., 1893, re: from St. Moritz; mentions trip to Innsbruck; horse and buggy riding in Davos; pet fox terrier named Roland; collection of pressed alpine flowers; wants to return to school in Geneva, 1-11
- to (Mother) Rebecca Lea, 1897, re: personal matters; from Cincinnati, Ohio; writes about all that has happened since marrying Dalton; personal problems with Dalton and Aunt Bessie; applies for divorce; appointment of guardian; Bessie is committed to the asylum; baby named Dalton Kelly Jr.; something happens to Dalton Kelly, Sr., 1-11
- Link, S. A. to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: from Franklin, Tennessee; President of Tennessee Female College; apology for misfigured bill; sympathy about Robert’s death; mentions being a schoolmate of Judge Lea, 1-12
- Lockwood, Annie P. to Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Villa Concordia; sympathy; 1-12
- Lord, L. E. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-12
- Madison, J. W. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: message, 1-12
- Mason, Alfred to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: from New York; an old schoolmate of Robert’s at Yale; sympathy, 1-12
- MacMarlow, E. E. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-12

McClanahan, W. S. (4) to Judge John M. Lea, 1897, re: business matters; from Franklin, Kentucky; handling Bessie's expenses and guardian of her child; she should be released soon; baby is growing fast; Bessie is at home again; mother and baby are healthy; boarding with Mrs. Hatfield, 1-12

Mead, Fred Jr. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: from Kansas; buffalo hunting; friends from Yale, 1-12

Mere, (2) to John M. Lea Jr., 1893 re: cards from Tiefenkasten; Stelvis Pass; hail storm crossing the mountains in Switzerland; personal news, 1-12

Metcalf & Walker, (2) to Judge John M. Lea, 1897, re: from Memphis, Tennessee to Monteagle, Tennessee; business matters; bill of complaint between Lea's and Yale; 1-12

Parting, Charles H. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: from Sunnyside, Arkansas; mentions mutual friends; news from Yale; invitation to visit his Southern plantation home; death of Jacque Board, 1-13

Pearson, A. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy; 1-13

Player, T. T. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: from Maury County; disappointed that Robert could not visit due to health; spent summer at Beersheba Springs; plans to work in St. Louis, 1-13

Ridgely, Ben H. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1898, re: from Geneva to Davos; U. S. Consul—one of only three of President Cleveland's appointees in Europe; may retire; has old papers belonging to Rebecca in his safe; asks about John M., 1-13

Salmons, Albert to (Sister) Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1897, re: from Franklin, Kentucky, to Davos; personal and family matters; mentions the cottage near old home place; Bessie and Dalton are having problems; Mother passed away; mentions attorneys handling a case; mentions Major Kelly, 1-13

Sissions, Mrs. D. W. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-13

Sportors, Holatia to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-13

Sweet, E. F. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: Springfield, Illinois; schoolmate enroute to St Louis from Chicago; personal news; planning a trip abroad, 1-13

Thacher, Thomas to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: from Yale; school news; studying German; mentions schoolmates, 1-14

-----to C.D. Berry, 1895, re: from New York; schoolmates of Robert at Yale; requesting Berry to give his sympathy to Robert's father; "Rob was a royal fellow," 1-14

Thruston, Gates P. to Judge John M. Lea, 1895, re: from Nashville; sympathy; has been in Washington D. C., 1-14

Turley & Turley to Judge John M. Lea, 1900, re: from Memphis, Tennessee: business matters; concerning the bill of complaint originally drafted by Metcalf & Walker; a bill of reviver; mentions Bessie Lea-Kelly married J. O. Leake, 1-14

Vick, E. G. to Mrs. Rebecca Lea, 1895, re: from Davos; sympathy, 1-14

Wheeler, Rush B. to Robert B. Lea, 1871, re: from new Marlboro, Massachusetts; request for picture of Robert's wooden spoon; mentions death of Jacque Board, 1-14

Williams, Mary Morgan to Judge John M. Lea; 1895, re: from Lexington, Kentucky;