

Wilson, Jeffrey T., Diaries

Jeffrey T. Wilson Diaries

1913, 1928



Title Statement

Wilson, Jeffrey T., Diaries Jeffrey T. Wilson Diaries, 1913, 1928 Ms.2011.015

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Publication Statement

Publisher: Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech

Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries (0434)
560 Drillfield Drive
Newman Library, Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
Business Number: 540-231-6308
specref@vt.edu
URL: <http://spec.lib.vt.edu>



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Profile Description

Creation: This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2023-08-07 13:43:20 -0400.

Language Usage: Description is written in: English, Latin script.

Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

Ms.2011.015

Unit Date

1913, 1928

Language

The materials in the collection are in English.

Abstract

The collection consists of two diaries (1913, 1928) written by Jeffrey T. Wilson (1843-1929). Wilson was a former enslaved person who spent most of his life in and around Portsmouth and Norfolk, Virginia. He worked as a bailiff in the Norfolk courts after leaving the U. S. Navy and wrote a column, "Colored Notes," for *The Portsmouth Star* from 1924 until his death in 1929. He outlived four wives and had at least twelve children. Wilson's diaries include entries on a range of topics from local news and politics, race issues in the South, and much of his personal history. The 1913 diary contains extra pages on which Wilson recorded events from that date in the past (i.e. "Fifty one years ago today...").

Creator

Wilson, Jeffrey Thomas, 1843-1929

Extent

0.2 Cubic Feet 1 box

Repository

Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

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Source of Acquisition

The Jeffrey T. Wilson Diaries were purchased by Special Collections and University Archives in February 2011.

Processing Information

The processing, arrangement, and description of the Jeffrey T. Wilson Diaries was completed in February 2012, following the return of the 1913 diary from a conservator.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: [identification of item], [box], [folder], Jeffrey T. Wilson Diaries, Ms2011-015, Special Collections and University Archives, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va.

Biographical Note

Jeffrey Thomas Wilson was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, in 1843. There is uncertainty about the enslavement of his mother at the time of his birth and conflicting accounts, but Wilson appears to have been enslaved by the Charles A. Grice family, who he lived with beginning in 1853. Prior to then, he was living with his mother and stepfather (Moses Taylor?). According to his obituary, he learned to read and write in secret. Based on his diary, he was the body servant of A[lexander]. P. Grice, likely the son of his enslaver, who served with Company A, Cohoon's Battalion, Virginia Infantry, at least during a part of 1862. In 1866, after being freed, Wilson enlisted and went to Europe with the U.S. Navy. When he returned home, he lived in the house he inherited from his mother. Wilson worked at the Portsmouth Navy Yard, as a laborer, and as a bailiff for the Federal Court at Norfolk. In his later years, from 1924 until his death in 1929, he wrote a column called "Colored Notes" for *The Portsmouth Star*. The column included social news, Wilson's political views, and issues of race relations--all themes that occur throughout his diaries. Wilson was active in the Emmanuel AME Church in Portsmouth, where he taught Sunday school. In June of 1929, Wilson was hit by a car. He died at his son's home, two months later, on August 25, 1929.

Prior to 1871, Wilson married his first wife, Imogene (also recorded as Emma J.) (1854-1882). They had at least seven children before her death: Joseph (b. 1871), Emily O. (1873-1881) (recorded as Emma on the census and once in Wilson's diary as Mary Emily Orphelia), Jeffrey Thomas, Jr. (b. abt. 1875), Mary Jane (b. 1876), Allen (b. abt. 1877), Margaret (b. abt. 1879), and Frank (b. 1881). His second wife was likely Laura Frances, as included on a list of "Colored Births, City of Portsmouth, 1857-1896. They had at least one child: Laura Frances (b. 1893). Information about Wilson's third wife was not found. Wilson's fourth wife was Blanche Blake, a woman many years his junior. They had at least four children: Wendell (b. 1912), Blanche (b. abt. 1915), Mary (b. abt. 1918), and Clyde Lorraine. Wilson was 75 when the youngest of his children was born. When he died at age 86, he had outlived four wives. At least six of his children were still alive.

Other Resources:

- The African-American Historical Society of Portsmouth, Virginia, has a brief article on Wilson's "Colored Notes" column available online.
- Jeffrey T. Wilson was the subject of a research project by a Norfolk State University student in 2004. Research from the project, including a transcript of Wilson's obituary, can be viewed online.

Scope and Content

The collection consists of two diaries written by Jeffery T. Wilson, one from 1913 and one from 1928. Diary entries cover a range of topics from the daily life and health of Wilson and his family, to his opinions on race, race relations, politics (especially in and around Portsmouth and Norfolk, Virginia), segregation and the Jim Crow South, and religion (many entries begin with biblical quotations).

Entries for the 1913 diary were kept in a Wanamaker's Diary (produced by the department store chain) actually designed for 1911. As a result, Wilson has hand-corrected the days of the week throughout to reflect 1913. The diary includes advertisements, as well as a history of the Wanamaker stores. A map of the store locations in New York City was removed from the diary during preservation, but is included in the collection as a separate item.

In addition to the entries recorded (two to a page), throughout the year, Wilson attached additional pages to continue writing. Many of these consists of reminiscences of his life in previous years on topics from the Civil War, his service in the U. S. Navy, segregation and race issues in Portsmouth and Norfolk, and local news. He also writes of daily events: his family's health, church events, the weather, and his frequent concerns about money. Several entries from the 1913 diary are quoted below:

Forty seven years ago the colored folks of Norfolk and Portsmouth celebrated the passage of the "Civil Rights Bill" by Congress and we all gathered in the city of Norfolk. had a big parade of civic societies, and discharge colored soldiers speaking out on the suburbs. The poor whites "sicked on" doubtless, by the upper class, interfied with us. tried to break us up. a riot ensued and several whites were killed. I was unhurt. Who killed the parties was never known. but several colored men left the city for fear of arrest. and have never returned. (April 2, 1913)

Fifty one years ago I was a body servant for A. P. Grice, who was an officer in Cohoon's Battalion C.S.A. encamped on "Dunn's Hill," near Petersburg. I had just been released from the Richmond City Jail. Where I had been confined two months. held as a witness in a murder case and that kept me out of the U. S. Army. Where probably I would have been killed or wounded. (May 13, 1913)

Wife bought a bed for Wendell. and he went to sleep in it. It seems as if I am to be the daddy of babes all my life from present indications. Well, if the Lord says so his Will be done not mine-- (July 28, 1913)

[Wilson and his wife, Blanche, would go on to have three more children, the last born when Wilson was 75 years old.]

Thirty eight years ago my brother and me met for the last time and as far as I know he is yet alive. Robt I mean, he is 72 years old. (October 1, 1913)

A womans life is of very little value in Norfolk even if she is white and a wife. (October 14, 1913)

Jeffrey Wilson's second diary was kept in a Regal Date book for 1928. His entries are somewhat shorter, though each still begins with a biblical quotations. He still appears to have worked at least part time as a bailiff in Norfolk, as he frequently writes "Court" or "at court." Most of the content, however is focused on local and national news, his role at the AME Emmanuel Church and attending services, and his own family. He notes almost daily that his "gals," likely his two youngest daughters Blanche and Mary, are well.

Keywords

African Americans -- History

Civil War

Diaries

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865

Virginia -- History

Existence and Location of Copies

The 1913 diary has been digitized and is available online. In addition, the 1913 diary is the subject of a digital exhibit and SCUA blog post, "A New Look at the Diary of Jeffrey Wilson" by Adrienne Serra.

Rights Statement for Archival Description

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Description of Subordinate Components

Diaries

Unit Date 1913, 1928
box 1