

Sara Henderson Smith collectionMS.0536

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1850-1865

Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

MS.0536

Unit ID

/repositories/3/resources/828

Unit Date

1850-1865

Language

English .

Creator

Smith, Sara Henderson, 1812-1884

Extent

1 boxes

Physical Location

Manuscripts stacks

Repository

Virginia Military Institute Archives

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access

There are no restrictions

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Preferred Citation

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Biographical / Historical

Sara Henderson Smith was born in 1812 to Dr. Thomas Henderson and Ann Maria Truxton Henderson. In 1835 she married Francis Henney Smith and the couple had seven children. They settled into domestic life in Lexington, Virginia in November 1839 when Francis became the first Superintendent at VMI. In addition to raising children, supervising her household, interacting with cadets and faculty, and actively participating at the Grace Episcopal Church, Sara was a published poet. Although a contemporary and friend of poet Margaret Junkin Preston (who was the wife of John T. L. Preston, one of VMI's founders and a longtime faculty member), Sara never gained the fame enjoyed by Preston.

Sara wrote stories and devotional poems, focusing on themes of religion, worship, piety, and moral conduct. In addition, during the Civil War she composed a series of long verse letters that provide accounts of local and regional wartime events. After 1865 she returned to composing primarily devotional poetry. Sara died in Lexington, Virginia on May 18, 1884.

Scope and Contents

This collection contains three manuscript notebooks that include verse letters, poetry, notes, and a few newspaper clippings (bulk 1861-1865). One of the volumes is titled "Order Book, 9th Regiment Va. Volunteers, Craney Island." On the endsheets of this book are glued original manuscript signatures of VMI faculty and others, likely clipped from letters. The pages of this volume contain Sara Henderson Smith's writings.

The collection also includes a folder that contains Smith's writings on loose pages within the "Order Book." A facsimile copy and an annotated copy of the "Order Book" are available for use by researchers.

Many of the verse letters in these notebooks concern Civil War incidents relating to VMI and Virginia. These letters were written to her brother-in-law and other family members, relaying news received from her husband, Francis H. Smith, who was serving on the Governor's Military Commission in Richmond (Virginia) and on Craney Island (Virginia).

Additional letters originated from her husband, and it appears that Francis H. Smith wrote his informative letters to Sara in verse and she recopied them into the notebooks, sometimes adding her own news. The letters end with news that "Gen. Lee to Manassas had gone, to prepare/For the vandal approach that now threatens us there."

The collection also contains miscellaneous receipts, copies and reprints of Smith's publications, and a typescript of a 2014 paper about Smith written by historian Edwin L. Dooley, Jr. titled "Lexington's Other Woman Poet: Sara Henderson Smith."

Related Materials

View a portrait of Sara Henderson Smith (circa 1835) [here](#).

Keywords

Poetry

Women poets

Devotional poetry

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

Virginia Military Institute—History—19th century

Virginia—History—Civil War, 1861-1865

Lexington (Va.)—History—Civil War, 1861-1865

Notebooks

Clippings

Receipts (financial records)

Correspondence

Smith, Francis H. (Francis Henney), 1812-1890