

A Guide to the John Adams Family Papers

John Adams Family Papers 1842-1943
1842-1943

A Collection in the Special Collections Department 11078
Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library
1997

History

Processed by: Special Collections Department Staff
Date Completed: 1997
Encoded by: Elizabeth Slomba

Title Statement

A Guide to the John Adams Family Papers

Subtitle: Adams, John.

Collection: 11078

Author: Processed by Special Collections Dept. staff; machine-readable finding aid created by Elizabeth Slomba

Sponsor: Funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Publication Statement

File size: 20 Kilobytes

Date: © 1997 By the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia. All rights reserved.

Publisher: University of Virginia Library

[Conditions of Use](#)

Funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from WordPerfect. [Date of source: 1997.]

Language Usage: Description is in English.

Revision Description

Feb 18, 2004 PUBLIC "-//University of Virginia::Library::Special Collections Dept.//TEXT (US::ViU::01037::John Adams Family Papers)//EN" "ViU01037.sgm" converted from EAD 1.0 to 2002 by v1to02.xsl (sy2003-10-15).

Feb 27, 2004 converted to conform to eadVIVA.dtd by vivastrict.xsl

Descriptive Summary

Collection Number

11078

Language

English

Extent

1265 items

Repository

University of Virginia. Library. Special Collections Dept.

Alderman Library
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22903
USA

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection is open to research.

Use Restrictions

See the [University of Virginia Library's use policy](#).

Acquisition Information

The John Adams Family Papers were purchased on February 2, 1994.

Funding Note

Funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities

Preferred Citation

John Adams Family Papers, Accession 11078, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library

Scope and Content

This collection, 1,265 items, 1842 (1872-1912) 1943 (one Hollinger box), consists of the papers of the family of John Adams(ca. 1816/1825-1873), a prosperous Richmond free black contractor and plasterer, described by one historian as the owner of "the largest number of separate pieces of property held by a free [antebellum] Negro in the entire state." Some of these items offer glimpses of his civic and familial experiences as a free black in a slave society. However, the bulk of the collection consists of miscellaneous canceled checks, promissory notes and receipts (1873-1912) generated by Adams' eldest son Joseph Adams(b. 1845) as executor of his father's estate. Also present are photocopies (obtained by the previous owner of this collection) of John Adams's last will and death certificate, and a partial typescript the 1850 federal census enumeration of the Adams family.

Evidence of Adams's immediate family and its kinship network, extended families, and acquaintances are evident and primary sources such as census returns and city directories confirm many aspects of the family's existence. It represents a long-term contribution to our understanding of the black urban experience during slavery, insights on African-American life in nineteenth-century Richmond, Virginia, and, by extension, spotlights the activities of antebellum, Civil War, and postwar black Southerners.

John Adams was born in Virginia but it is unknown when he settled in Richmond. He was a self-employed plasterer and building contractor whose family consisted of his wife Octavia(b. 1829), sons Joseph(b. 1845) and John(b. 1847/1849) and daughters Alice(b. 1848/1849) and Deborah(ca. 1850-1860?). The family residence was 227 West Leigh Street. Apparently, Adams was a slaveholder; in 1864 a Confederate soldier named Gerard successfully sued him because Adam's female slave, a washerwoman, died before returning the soldier's laundry to him. Shortly before the slave's death she gave her possessions (including Gerard's clothing) to Adams, who then sold them.

Adams died on January 14, 1873 due to erysipelas (strep infection); in his January 8 will ("suffering from impaired vision . . . said will was read Slowly and distinctly to him") he named his eldest son Joseph as executor of his estate and bequeathed approximately six houses, eleven property lots and cash to his wife Octavia and children (Joseph, John H., and Alice E. Patterson), two sisters (Josephine Bulland Mary Chapman) and a brother-in-law, Walter Swann(?). Adams, who invested heavily in real estate, was frequently described as "wealthy"; according to the Richmond Daily Whighis estate was worth \$25,000 to \$30,000.

John Adams is represented in the collection by various financial and legal items chiefly pertaining to property transactions in Henrico County and the cities of Richmond and Petersburg: suits, estate papers, promissory notes, indentures, contracts, deeds, stocks, tax records, insurance policies, orders and payments for building supplies. However, he was frequently in financial difficulties for failing to pay for property purchases, repay loans, and other debts.

His papers are filed in two folders. The first, " John Adams: Miscellaneous Financial & Legal Papers" (1842-1876 & 1910) includes: a property contract, March 7, 1842; Richmond hustings court judgements against

Adams (July 25, 1842, February 27 and 29 May 1847); building contracts (August 7, 1858, May 17, 1859, ante 1861, and December 11, 1872); a deed of Thomas and Mary Hill for their sale of a Petersburg lot to Adams, 1867; and four stock certificates (Continental Insurance Company), 1870-1871. The second folder, "John Adams: Financial & Legal Papers re administration of his estate" (1872-1878) includes: a photocopy of Adams's January 8, 1873 last will and testament; his January 14, 1873 death certificate; a January 15, 1873 receipt for the digging of Adams' grave at the Union Mechanic's Burying Ground; an April 8, 1873 doctor's receipt for medical treatment of Adams during his final illness; an April 10, 1873 lawyer's receipt for writing Adams' will; and a pew rental notice, Grace Street Baptist Church, 1873.

Octavia Adams, widow of John Sr., is represented by 12 items, 1874-1887, in one folder containing a pew rental notice, Grace Street Baptist Church, 1876; a letter to her, 1887; and various items pertaining to payment of taxes and her husband's estate.

Joseph Adams, eldest child and son of John Adams, is represented by the majority of documents in this collection (1867-1912, ca. 900 items) consisting of four folders indicative of some of his professional and civic activities and duties as executor of his father's estate. Items include: an 1867 invitation to the "1st Annual [banquet?] of the Union Aid" from Mary Goodall; a day book/account book of his plastering work, 1869-1879; a Freedman's Savings and Trust Company bank book, 1873-1874; receipts of A. S. Lee (1875-1876) and William M. Ledley (1874) for delivery of building supplies including lime, plaster, and bricks; a February 4, 1880 receipt from two school teachers noting payment of 50 cents "for the schooling of Joe Adams" (son of Joseph) and a May 12, 1882 teacher's letter complaining about his son John's bad behavior and requesting that he be given "a good whipping"; two items pertaining to his bankruptcy case, March 23, 1881; receipts and related items regarding the purchase of a piano from Walter D. Moses & Company, 1896; Masonic lodge items 1896-1900; notification of Richmond Charitable Union Board meetings, ante May 7, 1901; a Richmond Memorial Association form letter appealing for funds to construct a fence around "our cemeteries near Barton Heights," 1905; and other items related to plastering work and the purchase of city lots. Also present is a folder of fire insurance policies and renewal certificates for Adams' property (1855-1877) and a folder of canceled checks, receipts, and promissory notes from various Richmond banks: Mechanics Savings Bank (1903-1912); Planter's National Bank (1868, 1873-1879); National Bank of Virginia (1873-1874); Richmond Banking and Insurance Company (1876-1878); and, the State Bank of Virginia (1872-1877).

Cora Ann Adams, wife of Joseph, is represented in the collection by financial and legal papers (1879-1910; 141 items) which include: two deeds in which her husband purchased property as her trustee to whom she later gives permission to sell, 1883-1884; a bank book (State Bank of Virginia), 1891-1895; canceled checks from the State Bank of Virginia, Richmond (1890-1896) and the City Bank of Richmond, (1902-1910); and, miscellaneous receipts and canceled promissory notes.

John H. Adams, second son of John Adams, is represented by ten miscellaneous receipts (1874 and 1876). He worked as a plasterer, graduated from Lincoln University, and later served on Richmond's common council. In November 1895 the Richmond Planet reported his marriage to Tisha Banister in Danville, Virginia.

Also present in this collection are items of the Isaac A. Goddin family of Richmond including various property transactions, 1859-1860 & 1872-1873, and a 1872 document in which Harriet Goddin empowers Deborah Allen "with the care, custody and control of my daughter Margaret Goddin until my said daughter arrives at the age of eighteen years or marries." According to the 1860 census Isaac Goddin was a sixty-one year-old white male notary public and land agent who owned real estate worth \$40,000; his wife, fifty-five year-old Eliza Ann, had a net worth of \$14,000 in personal and real estate holdings.

A folder of miscellaneous financial and legal papers (1845-1943; 11 items) includes: an indenture regarding the sale of property held in trust for the children of Nancy Smith, a Richmond "free woman of color," 1845; deeds of Richmond property sold to Robert Ryland, 1856; an 1862 property deed; two stock certificates (the Masonic Association of Richmond, Virginia) belonging to B. W. Langston, 1904 & 1906, and a 1943 form letter from the Federated Committee of The Civic Associations of the Annexed Territory on the correction of 1942 Richmond tax assessments.

The final folder is of miscellaneous items (1850, 1871-1889, 1930, n.d.; 13 items) including a photocopy of a partial typescript the 1850 federal census enumeration (#741) of the Adams family; a calling card bearing John Adams' name, 1871; a blank indenture form for the Directors of the Friends Asylum For Colored Orphans of the City of Richmond, ca. 1870s; rules and regulations of the Richmond Water Department, 1882; commencement programs, Richmond Normal School, 1888-1889; printed item "A Protest" regarding a religious dispute resulting from the Virginia Baptist State Convention, Lexington, 1899; and two 1930 postcards addressed to a Miss Essie Adams.

Organization

Folder contents are arranged chronologically.

Container List

Container List

John Adams: Miscellaneous Financial and Legal Papers

Unit Date 1842-1876 & 1910

Extent 52 items

John Adams: Fire Insurance Policies and Renewal Certificates

Unit Date 1855, 1862, 1867, 1876-1877

Extent 28 items

John Adams: Financial & Legal Papers re administration of his estate

Unit Date 1872-1878

Extent 96 items

Octavia Adams

Unit Date 1874-1887

Extent 12 items

Joseph Adams (folder 1 of 2)

Unit Date 1867-1879

Extent 165 items

Joseph Adams (folder 2 of 2)

Unit Date 1880-1912

Extent 151 items

Joseph Adams: Receipts and Promissory Notes

Unit Date 1868, 1873-1879, 1903-1912

Extent 277 items

Joseph Adams: Canceled checks and Promissory Notes

Unit Date 1872-1878

Extent 355 items

Cora Ann Adams: Financial & Legal Papers

Unit Date 1879-1910

Extent 141 items

John H. Adams

Unit Date 1873 & 1876

Extent 10 items

Goddin Family

Unit Date 1859-1860 & 1872-1873

Extent 4 items

Financial & Legal Papers: Miscellaneous

Unit Date 1845-1943

Extent 11 items

Miscellaneous

Unit Date [1850], 1871-1889, 1930, n.d.

Extent 13 items

Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, #11078