

John Bohlen Collection
1889-1912
Mss.B.B63

American Philosophical Society
2002
105 South Fifth Street
Philadelphia, PA, 19106
215-440-3400
manuscripts@amphilsoc.org

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Summary Information

Repository American Philosophical Society

Creator Bohlen, John

Title John Bohlen Collection

Date [inclusive] 1889-1912

Call number Mss.B.B63

Extent 0.25 Linear feet 10 items

Location LH-MV-C-3

Language English

Abstract Born in Schiffdorf (near Bremerhafen), John Bohlen became one of Philadelphia's most prominent merchants at the turn of the nineteenth century. Running a profitable concern in partnership with his brother Bohl (1754-1836), John Bohlen imported commodities from their native Holland. Thanks to an insatiable American thirst for gin, Bohlen amassed an immense fortune that enabled him to travel in the same social circles as Stephen Girard and others among the mercantile elite and to win a spot in 1816 as one of the Directors of the Bank of the United States. By the time of his death, he was one of only eleven Philadelphians whose personal estates exceeded one million dollars in value.

The Bohlen Collection contains a scant ten letters that appear to have been retained, as much as anything, for their autograph interest. Although they shed relatively little light on the life of John Bohlen, they do offer interesting glimpses into the personalities of Bohlen's famous

correspondents, including Stephen Girard, Francis Scott Key, Meriwether Lewis, Virgil Maxcy, Oliver Hazard Perry, and Timothy Pickering.

Preferred Citation

Cite as: John Bohlen Collection, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

Born in Schiffdorf (near Bremerhafen), John Bohlen became one of Philadelphia's most prominent merchants at the turn of the nineteenth century, running a profitable concern in partnership with his brother Bohl (1754-1836) importing commodities from their native Holland. Thanks to an insatiable American thirst for gin, Bohlen amassed an immense fortune that enabled him to travel in the same social circles as Stephen Girard and others among the mercantile elite and to win a spot in 1816 as one of the Directors of the Bank of the United States. By the time of his death, he was one of only eleven Philadelphians whose personal estates exceeded one million dollars in value.

Scope & content

The Bohlen Collection contains a scant ten letters that appear to have been retained, as much as anything, for their autograph interest. Although they shed relatively little light on the life of John Bohlen, they do offer interesting glimpses into the personalities of Bohlen's famous correspondents. Five letters were received by Bohlen, three letters by his relative by marriage, Daniel Murray, and one each by other relatives, Elizabeth Dorsey and John Gregg.

Among the interesting items in the collection is a fine letter written by Meriwether Lewis in Saint Louis, 1808, regarding collecting debts owed to Bohlen, a letter of Timothy Pickering to Elizabeth Dorsey displaying his eloquent and gracious style, waxing over his visit to her home, and a prototypical Oliver Hazard Perry letter fulminating about calumnies made against him. The three page letter of Francis Scott Key is also interesting in that it includes two pages of excerpts from a sermon that impressed Key.

Also included in the collection are a letter apprising Bohlen of his appointment as Director of the Bank of the U.S., and two letters of one of Bohlen's relatives pertaining to an early (1850s and 1860s) interest in collecting the autographs of famous Americans and mentioning the discovery of an account book of George Washington's secreted in a wall at West Point.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2002

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Francis H. Bohlen, 1999.

Processing Information

Catalogued rsc, 2002.

Indexing Terms

Corporate Name(s)

- Bank of the United States

Genre(s)

- General Correspondence

Personal Name(s)

- Calhoun, John B.
- Cole, J.
- Dorsey, Elizabeth
- Girard, Stephen, 1750-1831
- Key, Francis Scott, 1779-1843
- Lewis, Meriwether, 1774-1809

- Maxcy, Virgil, 1785-1844
- Murray, Daniel
- Perry, Oliver Hazard, 1785-1819
- Pickering, Timothy, 1745-1829
- Stone, John S.

Subject(s)

- Business and Skilled Trades
- International Trade.
- Philadelphia History
- Religion
- Trade

Other Descriptive Information

The Bohlen Collection contains one item which may be of interest to naval historians:

Perry, Oliver Hazard. Letter to Daniel Murray. 1818 March 1. "In reply to your inquiry respecting the affair which has...lately made so much noise, and which has brought upon me such a torrent of abuse and malignant calumny -- I shall only briefly state that [the circumstances as related] are all false with the exception of my having given personal chastisement to an impertinent and insolent fellow, -- who is destitute of truth and spirit -- and who has been base enough to circulate the most unfounded slander, and then deny it under his own hand." 1 item.

Other Descriptive Information

John Bohlen was a prominent Philadelphia merchant in the nineteenth century, dying a millionaire. Bohlen, a Hollander, established a firm with his brother that specialized in trade with his native country. His greatest success came in the lucrative gin trade. As his business increased, so too did his connections. He served on the Board of the first Bank of the United States and was well-connected with highest the political and business leaders in the nation. Although John Bohlen was a prominent and successful businessman, these documents have little bearing on Bohlen himself. Instead, they are a series of letters (ten total) written by prominent Americans either to Bohlen or to his relatives.

The collection seems to have been passed down through the family. Although the content rarely sheds much light on the Bohlen's life or career, the letters offer some hint into the social circles that Bohlen operated within. Letters from Meriwether Lewis, Stephen Girard, and the Bank of the United States to Bohlen touch on financial matters. Other letters are often notes of acknowledgement or an exchange of pleasantries. The letter from Francis Scott Key to Daniel Murray discusses a sermon and includes an extract from it.

Collection Inventory

John Bohlen Collection	1808-1865	Box 1
Lewis, Meriwether, 1774-1809 ALS to John Bohlen	1808 December 24	1p.
Re: debts owed Bohlen by Robert Westcott and James McGuffin, which Lewis will help recover.		
Girard, Stephen, 1750-1831 ALS to John Bohlen	1810 January 1	
Has been awarded \$36,741 in the case Girard v. Biddle.		
Bank of the U.S. Commissioners LS to John Bohlen	1816 November 1	
Notice of election as Director of the Bank of the U.S. Signed by W. Jones, Stephen Girard, Thomas William, Thomas Leiper, and Cadwalader Evans.		
Pickering, Timothy, 1745-1829 ALS to Elizabeth Dorsey	1816 December 29	1p.
Gratified by his visit to West River, the polite society and chaste manners.		
Perry, Oliver Hazard, 1785-1819 ALS to Daniel Murray	1818 March 1	
Re: state of Mrs. Blakely's pecuniary affairs. "In reply to your inquiry respecting the affair which has lately made so much noise, and which had lately made so much noise, and which has brought upon me such a torrent of abuse and malignant calumny -- I shall only briefly state that they (the circumstances as related) are all false with the exception of my having given personal chastisement to an impertinent and insolent fellow, -- who is destitute of truth and spirit -- and who has been base enough to circulate the most unfounded slander, and then deny it under his own hand."		
Maxcy, Virgil, 1785-1844	1818 March 24	1p.

John Bohlen Collection

ALS to Daniel Murray

Thanks for the pamphlets.

Key, Francis Scott, 1779-1843

1820 August 4

3p.

ALS to Daniel Murray

Sending extract of a sermon he had mentioned

Stone, John S.

1851 March 24

1p.

ALS to John Gregg

Letter of introduction for John Bohlen.

Cole, J.

1855 January 1

6p.

ALS to John Bohlen

Sending autographs of Washington (a page of an account book found at West Point), Marshall, and Madison.

Calhoun, John B.

1865 Nov. 29

2p.

ALS to John Bohlen

Sending autographs of the Lincolns.
