

LeConte family papers, 1827-1901
1827-1901
Mss.B.L493f

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

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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Title	LeConte family papers, 1827-1901
Date [inclusive]	1827-1901
Call number	Mss.B.L493f
Extent	0.25 Linear feet 42 items
Location	LH-B-18-8 (B L493, Series II)
Language	English
Container	1
Abstract	Principally letters from John Eatton LeConte, John Lawrence LeConte, Joseph LeConte, and Mrs. Jane LeConte Harden to Mrs. Matilda Jane Harden Stevens, Sumner Morrison Ramsey, Mrs. Ann LeConte Stevens, and Louis LeConte pertaining to family matters and natural history.

Background note

The LeConte Family. Although the American roots of this important family of scientists and educators go back to Guillaume LeConte, a French Huguenot, originally from Rouen, the family seat was the Woodmanston Plantation, established by John Eatton LeConte in Midway, GA in 1760. He had two famous sons, one also named John Eatton LeConte (1784-1860, APS 1851), who was a noted naturalist and a topographical engineer, and another named Louis LeConte (1782-1838), trained as a medical doctor at Columbia College in New York. John Eatton LeConte, a captain in the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, resided first in New York City and later in Philadelphia. His son, John Lawrence LeConte (1825-1883, APS 1853) was a noted entomologist and physician.

Louis LeConte inherited the family plantation in Midway, married Ann Quarterman and fathered seven children, one of whom died in infancy. He had a keen interest in botany and horticulture, and developed a botanical and floral garden at Woodsmanton, that soon became internationally renown. His wife Ann died in 1826, leaving Louis to raise his six surviving children. Louis LeConte's most eminent children were his sons John LeConte (1818-1891, APS 1873), a physicist, and Joseph LeConte (1823-1901, APS 1873), a geologist. John was a graduate of Franklin College and New York City's College of Physicians and Surgeons, who practiced medicine in Savannah, GA, before being appointed professor of physics and chemistry at Franklin College. His preference for physics led him to a faculty position at South Carolina College (later the University of South Carolina), which he held until 1869. In 1868 he was elected chair of physics at the newly established University of California, of which he later became president. His younger brother Joseph also graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons, but later studied at Harvard's new Lawrence Scientific School under Louis Agassiz in 1850. He accepted a call to teach all of the sciences at Oglethorpe University, but resigned to teach science briefly at the University of Georgia before becoming chair of geology at the College of South Carolina, Columbia, where his brother was already teaching. After the Civil War, difficult conditions led Joseph, like his brother John, to apply for a teaching position at the University of California at Berkeley. Both brothers moved to California with their widowed sister Jane LeConte Harden. Matilda Jane Harden Stevens (1837-1932), Jane's daughter, remained in Georgia for many years, and corresponded with several of her more prominent LeConte uncles and cousins.

Scope & content

The LeConte Family papers is a collection comprised principally of letters from naturalist John Eatton LeConte, his son the entomologist John Lawrence LeConte, and his cousins geologist Joseph LeConte, and Mrs. Jane LeConte Harden. Many are written to Jane's daughter Mrs. Matilda Jane Harden Stevens, as well as Sumner Morrison Ramsey, Mrs. Ann LeConte Stevens, and Louis LeConte pertaining to family matters and natural history. The largest number of letters [32] is addressed over nearly half a century to Matilda Jane Harden Stevens or, after her engagement to T. Sumner Stevens, Mrs. Sumner Stevens. In the body of the letters she is always greeted affectionately as "Tilly". Early letters in the collection from John Eatton LeConte intersperse family concerns with requests to his bother Louis and (later) his niece Matilda to collect specimens of seeds, bats, rats, frogs and insects. In several letters to Tilly from the summer of 1859, John Eatton alternately provides clues to his niece about the best times and places to gather specimens of tree frogs and insects (July 9, 1859), while correcting her mistaken identification of a Ciccada for a Katydid. In an August 28 letter he reports that his son John Lawrence has gone to Chickies in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to visit fellow entomologist Samuel Haldeman. In an October 15, 1859 letter to his cousin Tilly, the young John Lawrence LeConte commets favorably on his father's health, then adds his intention to write "a little elementary treatise on beetles" to be published by the Smithsonian Institution. John Lawrence's letters on the eve of the Civil War quickly turn ominous in the face of the impending conflict, certain to divide the nation and the LeConte family. On December 26, 1860, more than a month after his father's death, John Lawrence wishes his cousin Tilly "A merry Christmas," although he finds "little to be merry about." Instead, he hopes "that the disunion sentiment will soon subside." He predicts that "If it is persisted in, it means civil war, servile insurrection, and all the attendant horrors. The North will suffer, but the South will be utterly ruined." The flow of letters to Tilly during the War slows to a mere trickle of three letters from her Uncle Joseph LeConte. In a November 8, 1866 letter, more than a year after the War's end he writes to her that "I am preparing again all my notes of lectures destroyed by [General] Sherman & I have undertaken beside to prepare two Textbooks for high schools and Colleges . . . , one on Chemistry & one on Geology." Three years later on February 21, 1869 in the midst of Reconstruction Joseph writes Tilly of his intention to move to California to accept a faculty position at the new University of California at Berkley. His brother John (a physicist) and widowed sister Jane LeConte Harden (Tilly's mother) would move with him. Although Joseph finds "The condition of things in this State [of South Carolina] and especially in this university deplorable in the extreme," he feels "only too surely that in leaving the Atlantic coast I am leaving the best years of my life behind." Yet, the two bothers fare well at the new University of California at Berkley, where Joseph was appointed the first professor of geology and natural history and his brother John held a chair in physics. Seven years later in a letter of June 25, 1876 Tilly's mother Jane Harden reported that her brother John had been elected president of the University. During the final quarter of the 19th century an additional 17 letters arrived at Tilly's door, even as she moved her residence from Newton, Georgia to Middletown, Delaware to Bowling Green, Kentucky and to Richmond, Virginia. Most of these letters are from her uncle Joseph in Berkley. In addition to the correspondence in the collection, the LeConte Family Papers include ephemera and newspaper clippings. A July 9, 1859 letter from John Eatton to his niece Tilly includes a cartoon clipped from the newspaper and a January 14, 1897 letter holds a Golden Anniversary card, commemorating Joseph and Caroline LeConte's fiftieth

wedding anniversary. News clippings from the San Francisco Call and Atlanta Constitution, likewise, commemorate the anniversary. Two other news clippings are death notices for John Eatton LeConte and John Lawrence LeConte. Tables of Contents available

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Purchased from Annie S. Ramsey (\$300.00) and accessioned, 1960 (1960 1267ms).

Alternative Form Available

These materials are also available on microfilm (Film 1306).

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Family Correspondence

Geographic Name(s)

- Philadelphia (Pa.) -- Social life and customs.

Personal Name(s)

- Harden, Jane LeConte
- LeConte, Joseph, 1823-1901
- LeConte, John Eatton, 1784-1860
- LeConte, John L., (John Lawrence), 1825-1883
- LeConte, Louis
- Ramsey, Sumner Morrison

- Stevens, Ann LeConte
- Stevens, Matilda Jane Harden

Subject(s)

- Marriage and Family Life
- Natural history.

Other Descriptive Information

Contents of the LeConte Family Papers integrated into the John L. LeConte collection (B L493), Series II, Family Papers.

Other Descriptive Information

This small collection has a few documents that are primarily correspondence within the family, most of which come after the Civil War.